

Reclamation: Genesis

by DragonsManticoresAndGiantsOhMy

Category: Halo, Mass Effect

Genre: Adventure, Sci-Fi

Language: English

Characters: Shepard (M)

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2014-07-14 10:29:37

Updated: 2016-01-13 07:28:46

Packaged: 2016-04-27 05:09:59

Rating: M

Chapters: 17

Words: 282,984

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: AU. Halo/Mass Effect merged crossover. The galaxy, like much of the universe, is in a constant cycle of birth, destruction and rebirth. No guarantee our civilization is any different. We know others have come before us and perished at their height. What destroyed them? Could it destroy us as well? One human might be our savior, but he needs to grow up a bit first.

1. Prologue: Tell Me A Story, Stargazer

****Location: Unknown; Date: Unknown****

"I thought I told you no simulations during meals? That's how accidents happen."

A young human shrank back under his mother's glare and quickly pocketed the device in an attempt to appease her. It didn't work.

"You spend far too much time on that thing anyways. There's a real galaxy out here."

The woman's father smiled at the interaction, relishing how the tables had turned on his daughter. It seemed like only yesterday that she had been the same age and he had lectured her for similar bad habits. Now her offspring would drive her mad and give her gray hairs before she hit her second century.

"This is really delicious, Natasha." His attention was drawn to his daughter's spouse and his complimenting of the meal. The man had to agree. His son had chosen well in a mate. Smart, driven, and clearly gifted in the culinary arts. Which was a blessing since his son would starve if left to his own devices. Really, how does one screw up a nutrient shake?

His daughter in law smiled at the recognition and shared her secrets.

"It's the mixture of Thessian and Sanghelian spices. Really gives the vegetables kick."

To his left his wife, the love of his long-lived life and the mother to his two children, nodded and wondered out loud "Who would have ever thought those two would go together?"

"What do you mean, grandmother?" The man smiled at his youngest grandchild. Inquisitive and bright. A natural curiosity to learn. Frowning again he remembered how the same child never missed a single detail, much to the detriment and embarrassment of all.

"Long ago the people of Thessia and Sanghelios didn't get along. It took a while for them to learn not to fight each other." His wife's adoration shone through in her patient explanation to the child who soaked up her words like a sponge.

The child's eyes widened, eager to learn more. "Really? Why?"

"I've learned about that in my studies lately." His eldest grandchild responded to her cousin, eager to impart her wisdom.

The young man who had browsed through simulations earlier joined in the conversation. The old man knew how this grandchild was enthralled with the stories of ages past where heroes fought across the stars. The vids made it sound so romantic. So clean. "The Great War?"

His mother rebuked him yet again and the old man had to suppress his chuckle. He could practically see the strands of her hair turning from a glossy black to a bright gray before his eyes. "There was nothing 'Great' about that war."

"Grandfather, is that the one about the Shepard?" The small child's elation shone through in her words. He'd never admit it but she was his favorite. So much like his own sister when they were children. Full of life and happiness. And more than a bit of a hero-worship for the 'Shepard'.

His wife narrowed her eyes and glared at him. Even after all of these decades that look could make him question if apologizing would be a good idea even if he knew he'd done nothing wrong. "You've been telling stories again, haven't you dear?"

The man shrugged. It's not like he told them anything explicit. Just the usual sort of stories about the greatest hero the galaxy had ever know. He fondly remembered his own youth and how his own grandfather would tell these tales. That man had a way with storytelling, rest his soul.

His oldest grandchild voiced her thoughts again, this time taking a critical view "Most of the stuff I've read really doesn't make the Shepard sound so heroic." Her three younger cousins glared at the attack on their hero. "Many of the things he did where questionable and the ones that were not were just luck. He happened to be in the right place at the right time."

The man nodded and watched his grandchildren absorb that bit of information. He remembered when his own illusions about the man were shattered by truth but once he had recovered he saw that the Shepard was something greater. This hero wasn't some perfect god from

antiquity. He was mortal and placed in incredible situations that decided the fate of the galaxy. "And if he hadn't of been there none of us might be here today."

The younger children's eyes widened in fear as they processed what he meant and the old man could have kicked himself for being so flippant with his response. Glancing at his wife he knew what was coming next. "Well done. Scare them. This is turning out to be a lovely topic of discussion over dinner."

His youngest grandchild frowned, looking at the adults seated at the table for reassurance. "So the Shepard wasn't a hero?"

Giving the child what he craved the man smiled and nodded. "He was that and more. A single man who changed the galaxy but still just a man."

Tilting her head curiously, his favorite asked "Did you know him?"

The silence that fell over the table was only interrupted by the low hum of the drones cleaning in the kitchen.

Then as one all the adults, minus the old man, erupted into laughter. At his expense, of course. The man frowned, his pride wounded. He knew better than to place the anger on the small girl. She was innocent of knowing how insulting her question would be. But his wife, children and their spouses? Fair game and he glared at them all.

His wife showed the immunity she had built to his displeasure and needled him. "You certainly asked for that one."

Sighing, the man swallowed back his annoyance and put on a smile for the small girl, his favorite. "I may be old but I'm not that old." His smile widening he continued "When I was your age my own grandfather told me the tales of the Shepard."

Her face lit with recognition as she deduced her place in this cycle. "And now you're telling me." The girl frowned and thought it through. "But I don't want to get old so I have to tell my grandbabies."

His oldest child leaned forward and contemplated his father's words. "I always wondered where you had learned those stories from. So where did he learn them from?"

The old man smiled mysteriously, knowing his cryptic words would only cause them to speculate more "He may have learned them from someone who knew the stories as real history."

Practically bouncing in his seat, the young man blurted out "Was it the Turian hero? Or the Krogan Warlord?"

Frowning at her cousin's exuberance, his oldest grandchild shook her head and began deducing who it could be "It couldn't be. It was so long ago. It had to be the Asari scientist. She might have been a very old Matriarch when our ancestor was a boy."

Smiling at the discussion he had fostered, the old man leaned forward, knowing all would be awaiting his next words. He paused and

glanced at his wife, who looked bored. Well, mostly everyone. "I'll tell you what. Continue your meals and I'll tell the true tale of the Shepard."

His favorite looked like she might pass out from joy
"Really?"

"Really" He smiled indulgently at her. Clearing his throat he continued, his audience, young and old captivated already. "So to understand the hero you must understand the man. And to understand the man you must understand his beginnings. When he was a boy..."

"He was a boy?" His favorite looked perplexed. As if the concept of her hero ever being like the annoying boys she knew was an affront to everything she knew.

The old man laughed and nodded "Of course he was a boy, my love. What? Did you think they grew him in a lab to be the perfect soldier?"

"That happens later on." His wife's bored tone interrupted his storytelling.

As one the table shifted their shocked glances between the two of them, unsure if she had been joking or not.

The old man glared again and again his wife ignored it's meaning.
"You're ruining the story, dear."

She waved his concerns off with a sickeningly sweet and fake smile.
"Forgive me, love. I've heard you ramble on and on about this so many times before that I forget others have yet to become tired of hearing it. Please, by all means, carry on. He was a boy. The planet was Mindoir."

His eyes narrowed and he knew for sure she was testing his patience.
"I was getting to that part, dear."

With a roll of her eyes and sigh she acquiesced "Well then get to it while the children are still young enough to care, love."

He stared at her for another beat, fuming silently, but then shook it off and continued. "Right. So he was a boy."

"And the planet was Mindoir." The youngest child showed his inquisitive and sharp mind at the worst possible moment.

Pointing at the child the old man whined to his wife, "See? You're already ruining the story."

Staring at her lover of nearly three centuries the woman sighed, wondering out loud "How have we managed to stay together this long?"

Ignoring her question the old man continued "Right. So, the Shepard is a boy on Mindoir. The year is 2570."

This time his own daughter interrupted, her mind finding an odd detail to hone in on. "Is that galactic calendar or

terran?"

Speaking to her aunt the oldest grandchild yet again displayed her wealth of knowledge "It has to be terran. They still used that up until a few decades after the war. Something about politics and pride."

Finally losing his battle with his temper, the old man growled to the table at large, "Do you want to hear the story or not?"

The table went silent and slowly nodded.

Blowing out a breathe to regain his composure, the old man continued "Shepard. Boy. Mindoir. 2570." With a glare at his own daughter he specified, "Old Terran Calendar. He's only sixteen years old and his future is about to begin taking shape..."

* * *

><p>Author's note: This is the beginning of an idea that has bounced around in my head for, well, years. I've never attempted to write anything like this before so I would appreciate any assistance or pointers people could offer. I'll try and update this at least once every other week.<p>

2. Outer Colony, Inner Turmoil

****Author's Note:** A huge acknowledgment to General User on the Bioware forums for the creative and in depth Mindoir write up based upon David Weber's works. Coming across these ideas was the catalyst that gave form to the ideas bouncing around in my head concerning this story. I owe a tremendous debt of gratitude for the incredible work they did.**

****Also,** this will be the set template for the story. A chapter broken down into chunks with location, date and time stamps. Following this will be a series of Codex Entries to display information about the AU universe I've created by merging Mass Effect and Halo. I've done a lot of editing and creative interpretation to fuse the two stories together and give it my own spin. If this somehow offends your delicate sensibilities then this will not be the story for you. I hope to tone down the amount of Codex Entries as the story goes on but these first few chapters will require an extensive dumping of information for you, the reader, to better understand what I am trying to do here. If there is a topic you do not see covered after the first few chapters please bear with me. Either I have miscalculated what information would be prudent to introduce or I am attempting to preserve a bit of mystery of the story setting.**

****That leads me to another important bit of information to get out of the way.** This story will be entirely from Shepard's point of view in order to limit your knowledge of what is going on. Granted, most of you know the Halo and Mass Effect universes well enough that you'll anticipate what is coming next, but I do hope to throw in enough twists and surprises to keep you happy. Plus you get a lot of extended internal musing on what good ol' Shep thinks about things and people.

>

So with all that said, time to dive into the mind of a teenage colonial boy who is going to grow up to become the savior of the galaxy. Warning. Neither he nor some of your other favorite characters from either series will be perfect or squeaky clean. Expect a lot of darkness and the nastier side of life everywhere.

* * *

><p>Nouveau Basel, Mindoir, Malawi System, Maroon Sea; May 19th 2570 [Standardized Terran Calendar], 0659 [Local Time, Terran Standard]

"_and highs in the mid thirties. Expect light rain this evening with chances of thunderstorms for those of you along the foothills and in the mountains. This weather and traffic update brought to you by Binder's Fischmarkt in Nouveau Basel. Local, Earth and exotic aquatic food to match any taste, visit Binder's Fischmarkt today for something delicious tonight. It's now seven in the morning, local time. Time to get up if you're not one of the unlucky few already out and about. To help you get out of bed and starting your day here is the Dramaxeens with 'Dance Like You're Dusted'._"

I slapped the main function button on my omnitool to turn off the incessant droning of a radio jockey's annoyingly chipper voice and the throbbing pulse of bass from Wards style electronic dance music. The only reason I chose this channel for my alarm was because it could make the dead rise from their graves. Mostly from annoyance.

Fortunately, I wasn't dead. Instead I was face down in a pillow with a cold wet stickiness along my cheek. Pulling my head away I felt a damp spot where I had been laying seconds ago.

Ugh. Great. I drooled in my sleep. Again.

Opening my eyes I shut them quickly as the soft purple white light of dawn on Mindoir was an unwelcome sight for my sleep encrusted eyes. I rubbed them as I sat up and then instinctively extended my arms above my head to stretch out the kinks from sleep. All I did was succeed in coaxing a long and drawn out yawn that I could feel in my chest. I needed to get up before I fell back asleep.

Dragging myself out of bed I trudged to the bathroom, intent on splashing cold water on my face to help wake up. Stepping out into the hallway I nearly collided with the house keeping drone as it hovered past. The drone swerved out of the way and continued along, but I suffered a bit of a shock and jumped out of the way only to stub my toe on the doorframe. Grumbling and swearing to myself about worthless damn machines I continued on my path to the upstairs restroom. After a morning ritual of brushing my teeth, washing my face and emptying my bladder I proceeded downstairs to put a kettle of water on to boil. Oatmeal and hot chocolate sounded good. I'd make sure to leave enough water in the kettle for several cups of coffee.

Dad is going to need it. I grimaced at the thought of what shape he'd be in.

I contemplated if I should actually make food for anyone else but thought better of it. Ari could eat toast or plain cereal. After the remarks she made about my efforts to cook last night the little brat could handle that for herself.

Grabbing the kettle from the stove top I popped the lid off and placed it under the faucet in the kitchen sink. Turning the tap on I lifted my gaze to the window above the sink to take in the view of our long dirt and gravel driveway that lead to the main road we lived off of. On either side were the fields of soy, corn, rye, and wheat our family grew. Out back near the irrigation canals were smaller plots of grapes, bananas, apples and cocoa. We might live in Nouveau Basel with a tropical climate but genetically engineered crops and automated harvesting drones made it a non issue. Tapping the window brought up the display of the conditions this morning on the farm. Everything seemed to be in order so I tapped the glass again to dismiss the display. How did people ever get by before they had this stuff?

Sighing and looking around I noticed mom's sky car parked in it's usual spot but dad's terrestrial SUV was nowhere in sight.

My early morning grogginess faded into panic. Shit. Shit. Triple shit. Dad wasn't home yet and mom was home early. She usually returned home later in the afternoon from her 'trips' to Elysium.

I quickly turned the faucet off, my thoughts of breakfast long gone. I ran up the stairs, taking the steps two at a time, pausing only at the top landing to hear muffled voices coming from my parent's room. The locking mechanism for their room was a bright lurid green. Unlocked.

Hesitantly I activated the door and poked my head in to see my mother and sister in an embrace on the edge of of the bed. My sister sat molded to Mom's hip, her arms wrapped around Mom's midsection and head leaning on her shoulder. Mom had her cheek resting on the crown of Ari's head. Her arms enveloped my sister's narrow shoulders, squeezing her in a motherly hug. They rocked back an forth gently as they seemed to talk about something I couldn't quite make out.

The morning glow coming from the window behind them framed the visual perfectly. A sacred moment that made me feel like an intruder. The only thing ruining the scene was the dull blue glow of an activated holo on the nightstand. A frozen moment from years ago and happier times.

A younger version of my parents stood shoulder to shoulder with my father holding an infant Ari in his arms while Mom had arms around my big sister Lizzy and me.

"Luis?"

My eyes snapped back to my mother who had taken notice of my presence. Whatever precious moment that was transpiring here was gone. In it's place a suffocating tension that seemed to be more and more common around the house filled the room. Mom tried to convey her joy in seeing me but the guilt in her eyes reminded me of where she had been and why my father was somewhere sleeping off an all night bender.

I couldn't maintain eye contact with her. I chose to lower my head and leave them be.

"I'll go put the water on." It was a lame excuse to leave but I still loved my mother and didn't want to start off the day by hurting her with my anger. Not in front of Ari, at least.

* * *

><p>Nouveau Basel, Mindoir, Malawi System, Maroon Sea; May 19th 2570 [Standardized Terran Calendar], 0745 [Local Time, Terran Standard]

Mother and daughter dug into a pile of waffles they had made. Or, more like, my mother had attempted to teach my sister but Ari was too impatient and hungry to learn. It was rather adorable family bonding if you didn't count the whole part about Mom having just returned less than an hour ago from seeing her 'special friend'.

I sighed to myself as I dug into my bowl of oatmeal. Maybe I was being a cynical teenage prick. No matter what her transgressions against the family were she was still my mother.

"Mijo, are you sure you don't want any?" By this point it was apparent she was trying to make a peace offering with syrup coated goodness. Or fulfilling some sort of motherly guilt complex.

"Nope. I'm fine with oatmeal." My reply was blunt. Yep. Definitely a cynical teenage prick. I tried to keep my tone sounding normal, which, if you've ever tried means it sounded nothing of the sort. Or maybe that was just to my ears.

Her resigned nod and downcast eyes let me know it wasn't.

"Whatever. More for me!" Ari managed to say around a mouthful of waffle. Bless her oblivious little heart.

She proceeded to drench her next victim in enough syrup to make me wonder if she might put a dent into the reserves of Mindoir.

"Araceli Lindsay Shepard! What have I told you about talking and chewing at the same time? And you don't need that much syrup! Most of it will just stay on your plate when you're done!" Mom let rip her trademark annoyed bark punctuated by a sigh before she composed herself. That only happened when her nerves were starting to fray from exhaustion and frustration. I guess the days of traveling back and forth between clusters were getting to her?

Ari's delicate features scrunched up with childish pleading as she shrugged. Her exaggerated motions causing her dark brown curls to bounce and sway, the illuminated strands woven in pulsing in rhythm with the movements. Which was a stark contrast to the way she went back to chewing her meal like one of the cattle on the other side of the county.

Mom rested her face in the palm of her hand and breathed deeply. Ari's chewing slowed as she seemed to have finally caught on to the fact that all was not right in the house.

For my part, I just continued to eat my oatmeal, grateful for the silence that followed as it gave me time to think. The drones needed their firmware updated and a thorough maintenance before harvesting next week. I also had a report and presentation due on Friday about the Interplanetary War and the implications it had on how the Systems Alliance and UNSC handled secessionists and insurrectionists. I'd put it off for so long because, really, I'm a farm kid on Mindoir. When is knowing this ever going to be important for me?

Apparently others were not as appreciative of the silence. Ari had begun to tap her fork against the plate in some rhythmic pattern but I had no clue what it was. In fact I was pretty sure she was just making it up as she went and it showed. We could scratch musical talent off the list of possible gifts my sister possessed.

Mom cleared her throat before sending a less than subtle glare towards my sister to make her stop. Turning her attention to me she softened her gaze and asked "What about you? Any plans for today?"

I shrugged, not at all interested in making conversation right now, instead focusing my eyes on my nearly empty bowl and stirring the mixture of oatmeal, raisins and almonds. I still couldn't keep eye contact without feeling angry and then guilty for my anger towards her. But I knew enough to know that Hannah Gonzalez-Shepard wouldn't let me slide much longer with short responses and body language. I had to appease her now to avoid her wrath later so I thought about her question. "I dunno. Probably get started on the prep work for the harvest. Maybe head into town for a bit."

Ari perked up at this, practically bouncing in her seat with excitement. "Oh! Can I go? I want to go!" She begged and pleaded with our mother. "Please, mom? Please?"

Annoyed with my sister just inviting herself along with me acting as chaperone I glared at her. "I said maybe I'd go. Besides you always complain about having to walk."

"Knock it off, both of you." Mom's frayed patience was more and more obvious. Just how ugly the confrontation would be this morning when dad walked in was beginning to worry me. "Take your sister with you. Your father can start the prep work. Whenever he decides to show up."

Oh shit. I grimaced at the implied threat of my mother having a discussion with my father whenever he got home. Maybe getting Ari out of the house was a good idea.

"I'm going to shower and get ready so if you're coming you need to hurry up." After directing my comment to Ari I practically bolted from my seat, sure to toss my dishes into the dishwasher before pilfering a carrot from the fridge. I was not about to become a target for my mother's building rage.

After a quick shower I dressed in a pair of jeans and a t shirt for the '68 Summer Olympics held in New Alexandria. My Tia Alicia and her family had attended as part of her job working for the Systems Alliance's diplomatic corps attached to the ambassador's office on the Citadel. She managed wrangle quite a few free items relating to the event and all I merited was this shirt. I had worn it around the house a couple of days ago so I gave it an experimental sniff. Yep.

Still clean. Finishing off the ensemble with my dirty work boots I looked in the mirror and found my reflection to be like any teenage colonial boy that dressed himself. Disheveled and possibly homeless.

Frowning at my image I ran my hand through my hair and blew out a breath of frustration. There was nothing I could do about the thick wavy mess that I called hair. Mom had pretty much forbidden me from cutting it short because, as she said, '_only Terminus criminals and UNSC soldiers wear their hair like that._' She was also of the belief that girls would love it as I got older. Said it would make me look dashing like my grandfather and uncle. Considering the stunning lack of girlfriends in my life history it showed what she knows. Forget dashing I would settle for it making my big ears look smaller.

I looked off to the side of my room towards the maze of clear plastic tubes and boxes that was the home of my hamster, Spud. I grabbed the carrot from earlier and used it to tap on the wall of the main compartment but he continued to lay there like a fuzzy brown version of his namesake. Popping the carrot through a feeding slot certainly got his attention. He bolted from his prone position and straddled the carrot greedily, hiding it from me as he began nibbling on the edge near his head. Periodically he would stop and raise his head to look at me accusingly, like I was going to steal his meal.

And that about summed up our relationship. I fed him and cleaned his cage while he alternated between ignoring me or believing I was a thief out take the very food I gave him.

Sighing at the lack of respect I seemed to get even from my pet I turned and walked out of my room. I heard the sound of the water system being activated meaning Ari had jumped in the shower so I had time to kill. I contemplated going downstairs to ask mom if I could borrow her sky car but she still wouldn't let me forget the last time my big sister Lizzy came home from Earth.

Mom had wanted me to show off that I learned how to drive by driving us home from the space port. Which is ridiculous since skycars mostly pilot themselves but I wasn't complaining. However, Lizzy had been in a bad mood the moment she got off the shuttle. The entire trip she had been bothered by a lecherous asari passenger who wanted to show her things that no human male could ever do.

Not sure I even want to know whatever that means.

Since she was acting like such a ray of sunshine she refused to take a run to the ladies room at Konstantestar instead insisting that she just wanted to get out of there and away from squid scalps. So of course she starts whining that she needs to use the restroom halfway down the space elevator which leads to an embarrassing mother-daughter 'I told you so' bickerfest that carried on when we entered the skycar.

It's moments like that when I realize Lizzy is practically a clone of our mother. From the stunningly good looks to the incredible intelligence to the stubborn 'I know best' attitude.

Needless to say I was driven insane having to listen to their calm, passive aggressive arguing.

So I might have overridden some of the automated safety controls and started speeding.

And I might have forced another sky car to move out of the way to avoid being hit.

And I might have clipped the roof of the house when I was parking.

I'm really not that bad of a driver. Pardon me for wanting to get out of that skycar as soon as possible.

Lizzy and mom managed to call a truce in favor of chastising me about trying to kill us all. Right. Naturally I was the bad guy at the end of this trip and mom had yet to let me even sit in the passenger seat of the skycar since then. Story of my life.

Walking back downstairs I saw Mom sitting alone at the kitchen table. The dishes had been cleared and she had a cup of coffee in her hands. She was gazing off into space, lost in her own thoughts as she idly played with the wedding band on her left hand. She was a stunning woman, tall and slim with hazel colored eyes and curly dark brown hair that she kept stylishly cut short around her shoulders. Her natural skin tone had left her with a deep rich tan that she always accentuated with the fashionable but professional wardrobe that was out of place on a outer colony like Mindoir. She always turned heads wherever we went, much to the annoyance of my father.

My heavy boot clad steps coming down the stairs snapped her back to reality. She reflexively smiled at me before frowning at my appearance.

"Didn't you wear that before I left?" she asked with raised eyebrows.

Teenage male instincts kicked in as I crossed my arms and frowned back. "Yeah. It's fine for Nouveau Basel. Not like this is Bekenstein or anything."

Mentally I winced at the dig about her parents, my grandparents. They lived on Bekenstein in what could only be described as an estate surrounded by acres of land next to the sea with green fields of grass and large greenhouse structures that simulated various ecologies from Earth. Picturesque, peaceful, and expensive. They even had a stable with a few horses for riding and a small lake they kept stocked with fish.

That had always been a source of friction in our home. Hannah Gonzalez-Shepard was the daughter of wealthy professionals originally from Earth who made a killing from UNSC defense contracts and Systems Alliance colonial efforts. She was trained to be a medical doctor in the finest schools on Earth before she met my father. It's not that my grandparents were bad people, in fact I loved them, but they were a bit much at times. They believed in working hard, making a killing and living the good life. And they most certainly were not the biggest fans of my father or my mother's marriage to him.

Albert Shepard, my father, was an orphan from the Toronto area of the UNAS. He had been raised in a Catholic orphanage by nuns and had the typical love-hate relationship with the church. Love the religion but

loathed the clergy.

The second he could legally leave, he volunteered to do manual labor on construction crews building colonies across Alliance space. Eventually that led to jobs on mining operations in the seedier parts of the Traverse. With nothing to do and days away from civilized sectors of the galaxy he managed to save up a hefty sum of credits.

My parents would meet in a club on Luna and within a year along came Lizzy and a marriage, in that order. Two years after that and the young family was sinking their combined savings into a stake of the Mindoir colonization effort to start a family farming business. I would be born the next year on Mindoir and followed four years later by my little sister Ari.

Needless to say her parents and siblings were less than thrilled with her decisions. Try as hard as they might it was inevitable that snarky remarks about farmers, colonists, the uneducated and lower stations in life would come from them.

I know my mother was ashamed at times that she didn't live up to family standards and it showed. She threw herself into her work helping to run and expand the only real hospital on the planet but her disdain for life on a fledgling colony on the outer edges of Systems Alliance controlled space was apparent. No matter what started the fights they always reduced to arguments about her family and Mindoir.

I guess nearly twenty or so years of marriage meant the magic was gone leaving only bitter resentment and apathy. She cheated with someone during trips to Elysium that the CAA was funding for medical professionals from younger colonies to receive training to better serve their fledgling communities. My father drank himself into a stupor here on Mindoir and pretended it wasn't happening. Ah, domestic bliss.

Mom's face went stony before reprimanding me "That doesn't mean you should look like a vagrant. Dress for the job you want and not the job you have."

I made a face as I faked pondering her comment for comedic value. I needed to get her laughing even if it was at me instead of with me. "Considering the fact I have no job, unless you count being a farmer, that's some pretty bad advice, Mom. Of course, I could wear my nice clothes for the harvest next week if you want."

"You're going to do that now just to annoy me, aren't you?" she asked with a half grin. When I responded with a shrug and fake bewildered look she chuckled before changing the subject. "I want you to know that I appreciate you helping out around the house and farm while I'm gone on these trips but I want you to focus on your studies. Your teachers say you're passing with minimal effort. You're not applying yourself enough. They know you can do better."

Just like that my anger with her was back. Whatever rapport we had going was gone. The nerve of her to not only thank me for taking care of things while she was off with her lover but then to tell me that I could do better? Seriously? "I'm passing. Isn't that the point?"

She maintained her patience but the body language from breakfast was back. Taking a moment to study me with sad, motherly eyes, she asked me "I suppose it doesn't matter at this point but don't you want to do something with your life? Be something besides a farmer on Mindoir? Your sister is-"

"Yeah, sorry I'm not Lizzy. You may have noticed." I wasn't sorry. Not even slightly. Not for interrupting her and not for what I said. I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life but I was sure what I didn't want was to be like Lizzy. Eager to run away from home here on Mindoir just like mom was doing.

She stood from her seat at the table and quickly wrapped me in a strong hug as I recoiled from her touch. I wasn't even sure if she had showered since she was with her lover. She would always mention about how she hated using the public facilities aboard transports. Nevertheless she squeezed me harder until I stopped resisting and reluctantly hugged her back, suppressing the raging emotions within.

We stood that awkward embrace for what seemed like forever but glancing at the chronometer on my omnitool said it was a little over a minute. But it was long enough for me to take in small details, like how much taller I was than her. She was a tall woman, roughly one hundred seventy eight centimeters and still only came up to my eye level.

She broke the hug to cup my face with her hands as she gave me a teary smile. "You're getting so big. And that hair." She reached up to ruffle the locks she was admiring. "You look so much like your Abuelo."

I tried smiling at her affection but inside I was panicking. Where the hell was Ari? I wanted to get out of here before things got any weirder.

As if I conjured something worse from the depths of my mind, the low hum of a hydrogen fuel cell engine getting closer pierced the silence. The crunch of dirt and gravel becoming progressively louder reminded me of the original reason I wanted to get out of the house.

Mom heard it too and took a step away from me as a dark and thunderous expression overtook her. Turning her head in the direction of the sound, her beautiful face and hazel eyes hardened, losing all warmth and happiness. Shoulders squared and fists balled at her sides she took a deep breath before taking long angry strides towards the kitchen door that led to the driveway outside. Slapping her hand fiercely against the controls, the door opened and she continued her march outside to confront who could only be my father.

Realizing I wasn't going to avoid their festive reunion put a serious damper on today's plans. I jogged back up the stairs to see what was taking Ari so long as a ball of stress and worry began gnawing at my stomach.

The door to her room was unlocked but I knew better than to barge in without announcing myself. The only thing that could make this morning worse would be to see my kid sister's scrawny ass half dressed. Knocking on the door I heard her flustered answer to come in

so I activated the controls and opened the door. Stepping inside revealed the interior of her room. The same dull and depressing metallic gray walls common to all prefab units. Pink, purple, and white décor was splashed about liberally to liven up the room and let you know you were entering a girly lair. It definitely gave the room character but it also made me believe that if I spent much longer in here I might contract a terminal illness that made me talk about cute boys and asari made cosmetics.

Still, no signs of Ari. She had answered my knock. Where was that little twerp? I wasn't in the mood for games. We needed to get out of her quick before our parents started fighting.

Afraid to step past the threshold for fear of catching cooties I called out for her. "Ari?"

Her brunette head popped up from the far side of her bed. Brushing curls out of her face she quickly apologized. "Sorry! I can't find my boots."

I quirked my lips to the right as I recalled her wearing them yesterday. "Didn't I tell you to take them off because they were muddy?"

Realization dawned on her face as she remembered "Oh yeah! They're by the front door."

She stood and I got a look at her outfit. One of Lizzy's old shirts that she forgot to take to college and gray leggings. The shirt was huge on Ari, coming to mid thigh and was for a band called Vorch's Ate My Baby with a decal of some rabid beast that vaguely resembled a vorch gnawing on a bone. The bright colors of the design had a slight illumination to them, the luminescence of the threads having nearly died out from years of wear and washings.

She was about as well dressed as I was. Seeing nothing wrong according to my well honed fashion sense I motioned for her to follow me.

We made it halfway downstairs before arguing voices could be heard, causing us to pause.

"You left them alone, Al? All night? So you could go drinking with your buddies? What the hell is wrong with you?"

"Oh now you want to be a good parent? After you take off a week every month to spend time with your friends, Hannah?"

"You know damn well that is part of my job, Albert."

"So you're getting paid to do what you're doing? You know there's a name for that profession."

"I hate it when they fight." Ari whispered next to me. I glanced her direction to see her hazel colored eyes glassy with unshed tears. Wrapping an arm around her shoulders I lead her down the rest of the way and towards the living room area.

We walked into a standoff with mom lingering near the kitchen and dad laid back defiantly in a recliner. You could smell the alcohol

permeating from his pores from across the room. If that wasn't enough the bloodshot blue eyes and haggard appearance were a dead giveaway.

Albert Shepard turned his attention toward us "Where are the two of you going?"

I froze and couldn't answer him. He was a large man and moments like this made him seem even bigger. A lifetime of hard labor had turned his naturally tall and lanky frame into nearly two meters and one hundred kilos of muscle. Not the sculpted, well defined kind you find on male models, but the sort men who work physically demanding jobs have.

None of that usually mattered since he was an easygoing and gentle man. Kind and helpful to everyone he met. Avoiding conflict and confrontation at every opportunity. That is until he drank. He never hit anyone when drunk, but he wasn't above using his size to intimidate others. And he certainly left me feeling intimidated right now.

More than anything his being drunk left me feeling conflicted. He would grow confident and speak his mind about my mother's affair but his own inebriated behavior made her actions seem sane and righteous. I didn't know how to make sense of this mess and just wanted to get away.

My arm still around Ari's shoulder, I nudged her towards the front door while I replied, "Into town. Checking on parts for the drones and stuff."

Dad lost his glare as he seemed to remember the responsibility of running the farm and looked genuinely ashamed. Swallowing he thickly replied "Be sure to ask Sarkis about those replacement parts we ordered. He said there was an issue with the certification for most of the farmers on Mindoir and Jotun was clearing it up."

Not bothering to stop for conversation I nodded and reached down to grab Ari's boots while activating the controls for the door. A second later and we were outside with the door closing behind us.

* * *

><p>Nouveau Basel, Mindoir, Malawi System, Maroon Sea; May 19th 2570 [Standardized Earth Calendar], 0906 [Local Time, Terran Standard]

Once Ari had her boots on we started walking down the dirt and gravel driveway in silence. Fishing around in my back pocket, I found the haptic glove I was looking for. Slipping it on my right hand, I activated the omnitool on my left wrist. A quick check of my credits and I saw enough to get the parts we needed with plenty left to buy lunch for the both of us. If we could manage to avoid returning home until early evening then that would be plenty of time for the both of them to cool off.

With nothing better to do I continued to play with my omnitool, hoping to look around the extranet for music and FRM free stuff.

Odd. I kept getting a no connection error when trying to access the extranet. I tried resetting but my connection to the greater Nouveau Basel network and cache was fine. It was like the extranet and everything beyond Mindoir wasn't there.

Sighing to my self, I was resigned to it being yet another outage. Some satellite relay or comm buoy must be malfunctioning again. Just part of life on Mindoir. Vyrant Telecom had been part of the bid that won the contract to develop the colony and they held sole rights to all the public telecommunications services and equipment. It would be another twenty years before that contract could be renegotiated so until then we were hostage to their rates and customer service. There's a reason Vyrant rhymes with tyrant. Either way, I wasn't doing much without an extranet connection so I shut my omnitool off and stuffed the haptic glove back into my pocket. I'd check again when we got into town.

"Hey, can I get on the extranet with that?" Ari asked as we turned off our driveway and onto the main road leading to the train depot.

I sighed. We had just barely got on the road and already Ari was going into question mode. She was normally a talkative little chatterbox, but when she was bored or upset she got worse. As if that were possible.

Considering the three kilometers or so of walking to the station I was in for an earful. "It's not working."

Ari glared at me with a dubious frown. "But you just used it right now."

"The omnitool works fine. I just can't get the extranet." I corrected her with a glare of my own.

She crossed her arms petulantly and replied, "Whatever. You just don't want me using your omnitool."

Well, she had a point there. Her extranet history was the stuff of legends. Who knew a twelve year old girl could cause so much trouble?

I counted off her transgressions on my fingers. "Maybe because in the last year you had mom's extranet account banned for calling the Elcor ambassador an elephant with no trunk that talks funny on the Courts of Dekuuna forums. And not in those words."

She shrugged in her usual nonchalant way. Using incredibly foul language was second nature to her. Mom was constantly punishing her for the less than civilized behavior but I secretly marveled at it. Where in the galaxy does a little farm girl from Mindoir learn to swear worse than a UNSC soldier or eezo jockey? Neither of our parents were that foul mouthed. Or creative for that matter.

Raising a second finger I continued, "You ordered an expensive set of reference manuals on galactic plant life."

"They have pretty pictures of flowers and stuff!" she exclaimed in her defense.

"All we can do is look at the pictures," I countered, "They're in some obscure Salarian dialect."

Again, the carefree shrug. "Mom wants me to learn another language."

I counted off a third finger. "You got caught watching porn."

"That wasn't my fault!" she protested by wagging her finger at me, "Sammy Hudson from school said milf was the name of a hanar singer!"

My eyebrows rose of their own accord. "And how does that explain you watching Asari Confessions Seven?"

"You look up milf. You click a link. You click another link. Crazy shit happens."

Can't argue with her logic there.

I opted to stay quiet, hoping she would ramble on and work out whatever pent up energy she had in her system.

Bored after a few minutes left alone with my thoughts I had the urge to do something to entertain myself. The loose gravel of the road beckoned to my inner mischief maker.

Focusing on a patch about ten meters ahead while we walked, I willed the tingling surge of a static electric shock through my body as I extended my right arm before flicking my wrist to the left.

Nothing.

I frowned and tried again.

Still nothing.

By this time Ari had caught on and decided to join in.

If anyone saw us they would have thought we were a pair of deranged idiots. Two fools walking down a farm road to the train depot waving their arms about while wearing looks of frustration and concentration. The occasional outburst of colorful language as we failed.

Ari jumped away in fright when a dark purple corona of dark energy surrounded my body. A split second later the gravel in front of us levitated about ten centimeters off the ground before falling back down.

My head started spinning, forcing me to stop so I could lean forward with my hands on my knees. Every heartbeat pounded in my ears. I was inexplicably exhausted and wanted nothing more than to curl up on the side of the road for a nap.

Ari lightly placed a hand on my shoulder as she cautiously leaned in to check on me. "Are you okay?"

When I grunted affirmative she lost all concern and needled me,

"Good, because you suck. How did you do that?"

I rolled my shoulder to shake off her hand and stood tall, my head leaned back as I drew in a deep breath. I took in the blue sky of Mindoir and the thin vertical shaft in the distance that was the Konstantstar space elevator. After a moment I teased her with a grin and a mockery of her carefree shrug.

She growled and threw a wild punch at my shoulder that I easily dodged. My lethargic spell behind me, I had a resurgence of energy, and hunger. "C'mon, let's go. I'm starving."

She let out an annoyed huff and kicked the gravel at her feet but complied.

After a few moments of sulking she began to try again in earnest. A few more failures accompanied with words no twelve year old should be able to string together she gave up all pretenses, demanding I teach her. "Show me how you did it."

I shook my head at her bluntness. "Wow. First of all, a please might be nice. Also, no clue."

Ari scowled before her face lit up in glee. I should have known she never played fair. Neither of my sisters did. "Show me or I tell Klara Palinkas you've got a crush on her."

I contemplated if anyone would miss Ari if I killed her and tossed the body into the Basel-Rhine river. Maybe tell everyone she ran away to join the Attican Traveling Circus.

Pretty sure I could talk our parent's into turning her room into another guest room like Lizzy's. Maybe even rent it out or even better, start a bed and breakfast with an authentic colonial feel for tourists. "How do you know she doesn't already?"

Ari saw through my bluff and kept up her devious smile. "Her boyfriend would have kicked your ass for the way you stare at her ass."

I became lost in my own confusion and panic over her answer. Boyfriend? When did this happen? Not that I was stalking her or anything. I just noticed things. Like how she ate lunch with her friends everyday this week. No boyfriend in sight.

Okay, maybe I was being a bit creepy. The saddest part was I didn't even question the part about this boyfriend kicking my ass. I just accepted it as truth.

The three fights I had ever been in were resounding losses.

Dahlia Oberst beat the crap out of me when we got into an argument over a game in elementary school. Although in my defense, she was and still is gargantuan by any standards. I'm pretty sure there was a krogan or jiralhanae somewhere in her family tree. Let's just say petite will never be a word that is associated with her.

Cristophe Lemieux knocked me flat on my ass with one punch for accidentally spilling his juice all over him in middle school.

At least I put up a better fight when he shoved me into some bushes last semester but the outcome was still the same. I wound up dazed and bloody on the floor.

Safe to say he really didn't like me. Every game and every sport in the Nouveau Basel intramural league he made sure to tackle, elbow, punch or kick me any chance he got.

He even turned running during physical education class into an EUCC match. Seriously, how do you think that up? It takes a special kind of person to devote that much time and effort towards tormenting someone else.

Ari's giggling brought me back to the present. It dawned on me that there was no boyfriend. Ari had made me panic on purpose for her own enjoyment.

Annoyed at her antics I snapped a reminder to her "We shouldn't even have done that in public. You remember what Mom said? If people find out we're biotics they'll make us register and then force us to attend a training facility."

Two years or so after Ari had been born there was an accident where a freighter had exploded in low orbit over the colony. Given the constant shipments of agricultural and building material entering and leaving the planet it wasn't that shocking of a mishap. What was shocking was the high levels of refined Element Zero dust that it released. I can somewhat remember the fear that set in as everyone in the community was terrified that they or their family would develop the cancerous growths that accompanied exposure to that much dust. Mom had been a wreck for months as she dealt with real cases of exposure and those who thought every lump or cough was a sure sign.

It wasn't until several years later that Lizzy had her first 'incident' when she sent a fork flying into the ceiling with enough force to bend it out of shape. In the years to follow, me and my sisters would continually display biotic potential and on the advice of Uncle Kamal, Tia Alicia's husband and an officer in the Office of Naval Intelligence, we kept it secret.

Biotics were forced to register with the Systems Alliance which would use the CAA and local law enforcement to monitor them. And in order to receive a permit for a bioamp implant system you had to attend and graduate from a Systems Alliance approved training facility. Since human biotics were rare, training facilities were only located on major worlds and cost a fortune to enroll.

Those factors helped push most biotics to never register or seek illegal implants to avoid the scrutiny from the government. And ever since the debacle surrounding the second series of bioamps for humans, there had been an increase of biotics joining insurrectionist groups as payback against a society that already ostracized them at best and persecuted them at worst. That in turn only legitimized the fear and hatred of biotics in human culture.

Thankfully we never had an incident while at school and since Mom was one of the senior doctors on the colony, she handled our medical records and exams. With no one else the wiser we had kept it a family secret for nearly ten years now.

Ari's face morphed from shocked to crestfallen and finally to frightened. She nervously glanced about but there was no one in sight on the road or the sky. We were shielded by fields on either side that obscured most of what we had been doing.

Watching her nervousness I felt a stab of guilt for having been a bit harsh on her. Not to mention hypocritical given I had been doing it too. As much as I wanted her to suffer for her little prank she was still my little sister and after what we dealt with this morning it was better to cheer her up. "We're probably fine. We just have to be careful not to do that in public. All right?" When she failed to show a change in spirits I added "When we get back later I'll show you what I am doing."

Her morose funk gave way to a bright smile as she added a bit of a skip to her step. Internally I cringed as I knew this future lesson was going to be a lot of me bullshitting since I could hardly understand what I was doing in the first place. I had searched the extranet a few times about biotic techniques but there really wasn't much beyond theory and scientific data.

"Thank you." she replied in a singsong fashion as her skipping became more energetic.

I shook my head at her emotional turn around. Ari was going to be a drama queen when she got older. I could only hope I wasn't living in the same system let alone planet by that time.

Still, it would be irresponsible of me to not temper her expectations right now. Irresponsible as in I didn't want to hear her claim she was promised that she would be able to use her biotics flawlessly by this evening, which I am sure is what she thought. "You do realize that I really have no idea how I do it, right?"

She bobbed her head in understanding, still refusing to relinquish her good mood. "That's fine. It's not like I can ask Lizzy." She pantomimed outraged body language with an embellished high pitched voice "Biotics? Sssssh! Keep your voice down! No one can know that I'm not perfect!"

While it was an obvious exaggeration the sentiment was spot on and I had to laugh at her theatrics. Elizabeth Shepard was determined to leave everything about Mindoir behind. Something like her latent biotic status was something she went to great pains to hide but could never run away from and that terrified her.

I looked around and noticed we must be nearing the station since we were passing the Sprague farm now. Old man Sprague was some shady character that bought plots of farm land across Mindoir as a retirement which sounds crazy until you realize he made credits so fast that the CAA seemed to perpetually have him under investigation.

All he grew was a variety of herbs, spices, tea and coffee. If you ever spoke with him he would claim that the spice trade was where the credits were. 'Like 1492 all over again' he would say. Thessia, Illium, Elysium, the whole Orior Cluster, the Citadel. They all wanted to flavor their food, the asari especially. If there was one thing the asari loved about humans it was our food. Hell even the

salarians viewed some of the more pungent herbs as an exotic delicacy. Our family made a killing off cocoa since everyone loved chocolate but once the asari on Illium learned that it was also considered an aphrodisiac they would pay any price for it.

I mean we are talking red sand prices. Not that I knew anything about what that costs. That's just what the guy who runs the ship that buys our cocoa to sell off world says.

But that brings us back to old man Sprague. He was known throughout Mindoir as a philanthropist who gave back to the colony that gave him so much. Friendly enough to everyone he met but he could be downright vicious about his business and land. You didn't cross him on either.

Ari and I learned that the hard way a few years back when we were playing along the fence that separates our properties. We had hopped over the fence because, well, we were kids. Tell us not to do something and as soon as your back is turned we'd be doing it. He shows up riding a sky cycle and brandishing a pre-Contact War era shotgun. The way he told us to get off his property reminded me of how the vids portray the Krogan in the Terminus.

No humor. No subtlety. All threats.

Of course Ari had responded with her burgeoning potty mouth. The resulting back and forth intellectual debate about parentage and what you could do with your own anatomy would have been amusing if one of them wasn't a preteen child and the other wasn't holding a weapon.

It had been up to me, of all people, to be the adult and talk them both down. Once we got home and told our parents I figured I would be congratulated for my fast thinking and maturity.

No such luck.

Mom became livid before making us swear to never cross old man Sprague again. Once she had calmed down we were told why we had made a huge mistake.

Turns out Mister Sprague retired from nothing. He was a front man for organized crime on Mindoir. His farms and investments were all legit operations but rumor had it they served as safe houses and stashes for contraband. Mindoir's placement on the edge of Systems Alliance space put us in proximity to the criminal organizations and insurrectionists in the Traverse and Terminus. That made us an ideal port of entry for the less than reputable sort to shift people and goods in and out of Alliance space. The high amount of freighter traffic was nearly impossible to search thoroughly unless the Alliance gave the go ahead for a Fucanglong style blockade. Because that worked out so well the last time the UNSC did it. I mean it only started the First Insurrection War.

Supposedly if you traveled into the foothills of the Gran Alps to the northeast of the county you might just run into several unofficial farming operations of Sprague's where they grow cannabis, poppies, coca, and tobacco. It was technically legal to grow these plants just like it was technically legal to use them for your own recreational purposes. The real issue was that you were only authorized to grow

with the intent to sell if you had a special license from the Systems Alliance, and even then you could only sell to authorized retailers and never directly to the public. This system required hefty fees, intense scrutiny from authorities and could be revoked if it was proven you were not following laws and protocols.

So Sprague paid the right people to look the other way and invested in local business to buy community loyalty. Chances are if you buy a black market colonial cigar on Elysium and Bekenstein, cocaine on the Citadel, or heroin on Earth it came from Mindoir courtesy of Nouveau Basel. And that's not counting what other crazy illegal things, or people, he helped smuggle in and out from the Terminus.

Knowing what I know now made even walking past his farm nerve wracking. To think that mom and dad had known about that for years while we lived on the next farm over made me also question their sanity.

Eventually the fields of his farm gave way to train rails heading to the east and west. A small open air station on an elevated platform with a roof marked the end of the road. Beyond it was several hundred meters of open field before a series of levees and walls blocked the Basel-Rhine river from overflowing during seasonal rain as it surged about 130 kilometers downriver to the Wilhelm Ocean.

To the east the rails ran towards the actual town of Nouveau Basel and the base of the Konstantestar space elevator that stretched upwards for tens of thousands of kilometers to Konstantestar Station. It would continue eastward, tracing the foothills of the Gran Alps clear to the other side of the large island and ending at the small fishing and farming town of Nouveau Calabria.

Walking up a ramp, we came to a set of benches under the shade of the roofing and sat down. No sooner than we had relaxed when a holo of a blonde human woman on the platform. "Greetings. I am Henrietta, virtual assistant for the Nouveau Basel Transit Authority Mass Transit System. Do you have a monthly pass? Have you purchased a day pass?"

I sighed as the VI repeated it's standard line of questioning. Didn't matter how many times I took a ride on the train, it never changed. Same creepy smile. Same robotic sounding dialogue. "We have monthly passes, thanks."

Undeterred, the VI smile and continued along with it's script. "The next trains headed to Nouveau Basel and Nouveau Calabria should be along in.. Error: Unknown."

Ari and I both perked up at that one. Unknown? Error? I glanced at Ari but she shrugged and looked just as bewildered as I felt.

The VI was obviously malfunctioning but to what degree? I didn't exactly feel safe boarding a maglev train run by faulty programming. For all I know it would start playing elevator music while it hurled us forward at ungodly speeds towards our deaths. Did nothing on this colony work like it was supposed to?

"You don't know or you're experiencing an error?" Ari's question seemed straightforward, but that's only if you have enough common sense to process it. VI's were notorious for getting the simplest of

things confused. Like that time we discovered the VI for the Konstantestar space elevator took everything you said literally. After asking every inane question we could think of, Mom had told us to stop before we blew the elevator up. Needless to say, the heavily armed UNSC Air Force security team waiting for a terrorist threat to bomb the elevator when we exited were less than thrilled with our family.

I felt a mosquito land on my arm and immediately smacked it. Pulling back I could see the bloody smear, but after wiping it away I didn't see a bite mark. You could never be sure since Totenkopf insurrectionists were caught smuggling in mosquitoes laden with malaria last summer.

The VI never answered the question because the train could be seen coming in the distance. Ari begun silently parroting the VI with exaggerated robotic happiness. "The next train to Nouveau Basel is arriving. Please stay clear of the platform edge until the train has come to a full and complete stop. Thank you for choosing the Nouveau Basel Mass Transit System. Have a wonderful day."

I snorted at the prerecorded statement. Thank you for choosing the Nouveau Basel Mass Transit System? Like we have a choice.

We stood and waited for the once sleek and gleaming white train to arrive. The original contract with the company that built the tethers and train systems across the colony stated that the trains would be changed out every four years, but the company no longer produced the train model they installed here. Stuck in yet another aspect of the contract that helped found the colony, the Mindoir government had no choice but to keep what we had or enter negotiations to amend the contract in order to get the newer models instead. And that would require an overhaul of parts on the preexisting rail system. Which in turn needed to be paid for by taxpayers who didn't want to vote for special tax increases or municipal bonds to pay for the upgrades. So we got to ride in the lap of colonial luxury until the citizens of Mindoir voted to tax themselves or the CAA and our Parliament representatives could squeeze money from the Alliance to pay for the upgrades. Maybe mom wasn't so crazy about hating life on Mindoir.

The train came to a halt as a sensation of static electricity washed over me, making my body vibrate in pleasant ways as the eezo nodules in my nervous system responded to the mass effect fields used by the train. Ari was faring no better as she had closed eyes, a grin on her face and her hair beginning to stand on edge. A devious thought came to mind as I reached out with a single finger to touch her bare neck.

The resulting snap and jolt of a static shock stung me but made her yelp and jump away in fear. She clutched her neck while glaring at me accusingly.

I laughed and jogged away, entering the open door of the train. I heard Ari's footsteps behind me as she undoubtedly ran to catch up and punch me. I took a glance over my shoulder to see how close she was... and tripped face first over the threshold of the train. The VI of the automated pass checker seemed to be mocking me rather than simply scanning my identitag for a monthly pass. "Welcome aboard, Luis Vincent Shepard."

Ari's giggles were drowned out by the murmurs and stifled chuckles of strangers on the train. Looking up I saw a mostly empty train car with varying degrees of mirth and empathy. Checking my face I found no blood or painful soreness. Seems my ego was more bruised than anything.

I sat down next to a still amused Ari, who couldn't seem to control her laughter "That's what you get, dumbass."

I huffed and leaned back in my seat, holding back my temper and the urge to smack her upside the head. It was my own fault but being embarrassed like that made me feel defensive to the extreme. Choosing to let my mind wander in an effort to cool down I absentmindedly began people watching on the train.

There were only a handful aboard the train this early. Not that there were ever many riding the train. Mostly people going to and from school or work on weekdays. Sometimes it was packed with people when a festival was being held in town. The real reason the train system had ever been built was to facilitate the building of the farming communities and later the automated transfer of crops from those farms to the Konstantestar space elevator, where they could be loaded onto docked freighters that were usually too big to operate in the atmosphere and definitely too heavy once fully loaded.

An older woman of Asian descent stared back at me with a frown causing me to look away in humiliation. No doubt she viewed me as some local idiot, which could only be compounded if she knew who my father was. Then I would be some local idiot, son of some local drunk.

Hushed whispers and giggling drew my attention to a pair of teenagers I knew from school were on the far end of the cabin. Nolan and Miriam, they were kids from further down the rails, nearer to the ocean. Nolan was actually the biggest gossip on the entire continent, unable to keep his trap shut about any occurrence that somehow found its way into his knowing. I still cringe at the memory of Lizzy's boyfriend being caught cheating at a winter solstice festival two years ago. Nolan had caught him and another girl making out and rather than keep it to himself or inform my sister, the punk had gone around spreading rumors that her boyfriend dumped her for a myriad of reasons. Needless to say, my sister was mortified and incensed at being made a fool of in public with such a small community of several thousand people.

The pair made eye contact with me and immediately burst into giggles as they leaned into each other and began whispering again. I felt my blood begin to boil as I stifled the urge to strangle the two of them as it pushed forth in my mind, causing me to reflexively squeeze my fists tight.

Beside me Ari continued to giggle as she pulled her hair back into a ponytail and secured it with a band from around her wrist. She was all smiles and youthful ignorance, the red glowing strands in her hair pulsing with the slight sway of the train as it rocketed down the rails. My sister was still too young and unaware of the petty social games that persisted even in the small farming community of Nouveau Basel on the isolated outer colony of Mindoir. Because really, there was nothing better to do on this planet any damn

way.

Wonderful. This wouldn't be relived in excruciating detail at school tomorrow at my expense. This day is just getting better by the second.

* * *

><p>Codex Entry: Humans

Humans, or Terrans, scientific name Homo Sapiens, are an omnivorous mammalian species originating from planet Earth in the Sol system, Orior Cluster. Related to other still existing primate species, humans are considered a young race, which is displayed in their genetic diversity. Despite this youthfulness, their recent introduction to the galactic community has been a cause for concern amongst other species as humans have adapted quickly and are now excelling, becoming competitive with races that have been established for centuries.

The species is average in height and build, comparable to drell, asari, batarians, salarians and quarians. In fact, the human species continues the curiously similar patterns found in the majority of sapient species across the galaxy. An upright bipedal stance. Manual dexterity with an opposable thumb, or thumb analogues. External genitalia for males and internal for females. More peculiar is human females continue a trend of large mammary glands in females of the batarian, quarian, and drell species that are near identical to those found on asari, which are a mono gendered race. Scientists believe these similarities are oddities showcasing parallel evolution towards traits that best serve sapients. Others believe a more nefarious or metaphysical source is at hand, such as the protheans bioengineering species. Many in academia dismiss this hypothesis with scorn as the evolutionary path of each species was already apparent millions of years ago. Well before the protheans themselves were known to have been a force in the galaxy.

Human physiology allows for an excellent blend of strength, agility and speed. Typically their lifespans average one hundred and fifty Terran years, although various conditions and external factors can reduce this significantly. They maintain strong immediate familial bonds, with somewhat close connections retained to relatives once or twice removed. The fur that grows atop their heads, near their eyes and across the lower half of their face in fact covers their entire body, with varying degrees of thickness. As noticed by much of the galaxy, Humans sculpt and fashion the fur atop their heads into various styles which suggests that the fur is related to social hierarchy and finding mates.

The life cycle of a human consists of an short infant stage in which the human is dependent upon it's parents and family. Then comes a somewhat longer child phase where the human grows at a fast pace while learning physical mastery of their body and basics of language, culture and sciences. The human phase of adolescence is marked by the onset of the capability to reproduce although this seems to be discouraged as their bodies undergo rapid growth, establishing the sexual dimorphism of the species. It is during this period that humans are culturally encouraged to focus on a profession or trade and leave the home of their parents. The next phase is known as the prime, lasting from roughly age twenty Terran years to age sixty

Terran years. During this phase the human is at peak physical health and vitality, shows no signs of aging, and is generally when offspring are produced. By age sixty Terran years, the mature phase starts, most noticeably with a dropped level of endurance and stamina. Humans are by no means invalids in this phase, still capable of producing offspring and being physically competitive, but it is clear they are no longer at peak condition. The last is the senior phase, starting by about one hundred to one hundred and ten Terran years which is highlighted by the end of reproductivity, fur turning white or gray, and greatly reduced physical capabilities. Humans of this age are encouraged to leave the workforce and spend their remaining decades of life in relaxation.

Human civilizations are arranged around private living spaces in communal settings, although a mated pair will share a space with their minor offspring. While no official caste system exists, humans are naturally competitive despite their highly social nature, leading to hierarchies that are fluid based upon success and failure. There is a bias within the species that tends towards tribalism, in which the human identifies with other humans who share physical and cultural similarities. Human culture also display an acceptance of a wide range of sexual behavior outside of standard male and female copulation for reproduction. Leadership within the human species is an mixture of democratic processes combined with forceful or charismatic personalities.

Human technology gravitates towards augmentation. They have developed a great deal of cybernetic implants, chemical enhancements, and genetic therapies to eliminate issues they see as weaknesses or inconveniences. Additionally, their augmentations allow for a greater level of interaction with their devices, weapons and vehicles. The reliance upon VIs is another hallmark of human technology, although some fear the ubiquitous nature of human VI usage is edging dangerously close to events that led to the quarian genocide and creation of the geth. Food production technology is also focused on augmentation, allowing human farms and greenhouses to efficiently produce great tasting and highly nutritious sustenance.

Militarily speaking, humanity uses a defensive strategy of protecting colonies and resources. Knowing that it is impossible to be everywhere at once, they focus on making it near suicide to attempt the invasion of a colonized solar system while also patrolling the entire cluster in attempt to ward off any who feel suicidal enough to try. Dreadnought production limited by the Treaty of Farixen has not seriously affected military strength. Humans have opted to continue their tradition of massive forward operating bases for smaller craft known as carriers. The novel idea astounded Turian military strategists during the Contact War so much that they quickly copied the tactic. Despite initially tense and hostile relations, the shared military obligations of humans and turians has led to increasingly friendly and open relations. The two races now regularly share military technology in an effort to create a Council Military force strong enough to face any threat.

The galaxy at large, and Council in particular, are troubled with how well humanity has adapted to the galactic community. While the economy still is not as large as any of the Council races it is rapidly gaining ground and has already surpasses all other associate races including the volus. Human media, particularly entertainment, is proving to be their most valuable export as the galaxy can not

seem to get enough of the human experience. Scholars caution that this phenomenon has happened before when quarians and batarians were introduced to the galaxy, followed by a lack of interest after the novelty of the species and their cultures wore off. The real threat to watch, experts warn, is human political, financial and expansionary behavior. Galactic historians who have spent decades studying human history and culture are beginning to warn that symptoms of dysfunction in the species exemplified by the Second Insurrection War and humanity's stubborn refusal to give in to the Covenant onslaught of the Harvest Campaign. They point to signs that these events are not outliers and the possibility that this race is immature and a potential threat to the galaxy. Comparisons to the Krogan Rebellions and the Genophage used to curtail their aggressiveness have garnered hostility from humans who do not appreciate the image being painted about them in professional circles around the galaxy.

* * *

><p>Codex Entry: Mindoir

A series of fortunate events surrounds the outer colony world of Mindoir. In 2537 a UNSC Naval patrol in the Maroon Sea Cluster entered an uncharted star system looking to discharge their drive core. After doing a standard scan of the system for threats the patrol group was astonished to discover a planet with near Earth like conditions and a compatible biosphere.

News of this amazing discovery placed incredible pressure upon the Systems Alliance to act quickly. Public sentiment, and eager investors, urged the human government to streamline the entire surveying and colonization process so that humanity might gain a foothold within the cluster immediately. However, security analysts within the government and UNSC balked, producing reports and estimates that the production and formation of permanent defense forces to protect the new colony and it's associated infrastructure would not be ready in time to keep pace with the projected colonization.

Undeterred, in 2542 the rights to the world were rewarded to the Delta Pavonis Foundation, which together with their investment group placed the winning bid based upon their projection of turning the planet into a food production center like Harvest and Eden Prime. By 2553 basic infrastructure had been finalized allowing for the first wave of colonists to arrive, consisting of individuals and families purchasing plots of farmland and farming equipment from investment partners. In the years since, with only a token detachment of UNSC defense forces, the colony has flourished, becoming one of the most rapidly profitable colonies while managing to avoid major setbacks or catastrophes.

The government of Mindoir is located on Konstantestar Orbital Station, high above it's largest settlement of Nouveau Basel. Political intrigue with the colony is growing as all parties see the conditions of Mindoir allowing for rapid future expansion and much greater population growth. Currently the government of Mindoir is in negotiations with the CAA to allow for a second wave of colonization on the planet and within the solar system, with an emphasis on mining, gas harvesting, and refinement. If this colonization is approved, it would increase the economic diversification of the

entire system and allow the people of Mindoir to have more representation in the Systems Alliance Parliament.

The good luck of the planet Mindoir and the Malawi system seems to keep on going, proving detractors and the worrisome wrong time and time again.

* * *

><p>Codex Entry: Systems Alliance

Humans are renown for their genetic diversity, culture of individualism, and general adaptability. Galactic scholars believe these traits are the source of their rapid expansion and ascension. This makes the Systems Alliance, their government body, all that much more impressive as it maintains supreme control of this young and at times rash species.

The structure of this government body dates back to the aftermath of the Interplanetary War. The UN forces that had succeeded in bringing peace to Earth forcibly dissolved the UN Security Council, insisting on a parliamentary system which gave equal footing to all nations and peoples. While the notion was idealistic and perhaps naive, the horrors of the Interplanetary War led that generation of humans to believe, and those that followed, that the fate of the species was far too intertwined to allow any one nation to have more say than others. What they created was the United Earth Government, or UEG.

The original charter and constitution of the UEG allowed for the sovereignty of nations with the caveat that UEG law and directives supersede national law when they conflicted. Additionally, all national military forces were abolished and supplanted by the UNSC. The first parliament was convened with two bodies. One composed of representatives from each national government, called the House of Nations. The other of representatives voted in by the populace of newly drawn up global districts known as the House of Earth. The Prime Minister was selected from the House of Earth based upon a vote by the representatives and verified by the House of Nations.

The UEG saw it's first major obstacle with understanding how to best classify humans living beyond Earth and it's orbit. While many nations attempted to claim their citizens living abroad in the Sol system, there was a general consensus amongst the public and the House of Earth that this issue would be revisited again in the future should humanity ever expand beyond Sol. Thus negotiations were conducted to establish Luna and Mars as nations, complete with their own national governments and representation in the UEG. The remaining humans not tied to a nation were given the title of 'Spacer' provided they had no permanent residence on Earth, Mars or Luna. The UEG Parliament then opened up a district seat for a Spacer representation but no national seat as there was no unified nation.

This model was refined and upheld when Arcturus Station was commissioned as the new home of the UEG's successor, the Systems Alliance. Viewed as both a spectacle of human ingenuity and a neutral ground, the station was to assure the newly founded colonies that while Earth may be the birthplace of the human race it was no longer the only home they knew. Just as before, the colonies intended to become large population centers were given sovereignty, a seat in the

House of Nations, and districts seats according to population totals in the now renamed House of Arcturus. Spacers would be drawn from those who lived primarily aboard ships and in remote facilities.

Aside from the Prime Minister, UNSC, House of Arcturus, and House of Nations the Systems Alliance operates several other necessary functions. The Diplomatic Corps handles foreign relations with each major species as well as being the office of the Human Ambassador to the Citadel Council. The Magistrate's Court is the highest level of judicial authority, able to resolve conflicts that can not be handled by national courts. The Colonial Authority Administration, or CAA, is an office dedicated to founding colonies and then helping them resolve issues while also keeping current records on census and individual movements via mandatory identitags. The Department of Commercial Shipping, or DCS, oversees the transportation of goods and people between star systems while also working with the UNSC Air Force and CAA to monitor all travel. The Ministry of Astronavigation, which helps run slipstream exit and entry points, monitor space traffic and help plot courses for the DCS and UNSC. The Ministry of Astrophysics, Geology, and Surveying, or MAGS, is tasked with exploration, maintaining star charts, and searching for viable or near viable worlds to colonize. The Ministry of Transhuman Studies, or MTrans, manages creates public policy and research done on human augmentation via cybernetics, chemical enhancement and genetic therapy as well as study the phenomenon of biotic humans. And the Ministry of Intelligence and Investigations, known famously as MI Squared, gathers data from all national and local law enforcement agencies to prosecute crimes beyond the scope of national governments and create a better understanding of threats within Systems Alliance space.

A term for the House of Nations is up to the discretion of the nation they represent, which can remove them at their leisure. District seats for the House of Arcturus are voted on every six years who then vote to keep the current Prime Minister or nominate a replacement. The Prime Minister can serve no more than three consecutive terms or four separate ones. The Magistrate's Court appointments last eight years and can be renewed twice before retirement. The Ambassador to the Council is selected by the Prime Minister, confirmed by the Parliament, and serves until withdrawn by the Systems Alliance or expelled by the Council.

The officially recognized languages of the Systems Alliance are English, Chinese, Spanish, Hindi, and Russian. French, Bengali, Japanese, German, Portuguese and Arabic are commonly used although not recognized. The metric system and all derived systems of measure are the standard units recognized by the Systems Alliance. Time is measured based upon the Terran standard of a twenty four hour day and three hundred and sixty five day year. All school children in Systems Alliance space are taught to understand at least two of the primary languages and the metric system.

While this form of government has stood for several centuries it has not been without criticism and disapproval. While none contest the need for the UEG following the Interplanetary War, many have begun to view the power the Systems Alliance wields as too much. The largest grievance being that while technically fair, the structure of Parliament gives too much sway and power to Earth, where the separate nations often band together out of mutual interest. Other annoyances

like the usage of the Terran Standard for time despite living on worlds where that system makes no sense and the mandatory nature of identitags also create hostility towards the government. Furthermore, dissent has been steadily rising since the controversial decision to sign the Citadel Charter and become subservient to the Citadel Council. The Insurrection Wars and current political parties like Terra Firma are proof that a sizable population of humanity views the need for a massive government to oversee the entire race has long since expired.

* * *

><p>Codex Entry: United Nations Space Command Defense Forces

The United Nations Space Command Defense Forces, or UNSC for short, is the only recognized military force of the human race. It has its roots in the Interplanetary War where UN peacekeepers in Brazil outside of Rio de Janeiro organized refugees into the famous fighting force credited with saving the human race from self destruction.

Just as the UEG transitioned from an Earth centric government into the Systems Alliance based out of Arcturus Station, the UNSC has transitioned several times to better meet the requirements of defending the human race wherever they may go. Recruitment is steady as veterans of the UNSC typically enjoy greater demand in the private sector should they choose to leave service early. This is generally attributed to the wide range of skills and training given to those in uniform in addition to the multitude of specialized implants and genetic augmentation packages that are not available to the public.

The primary challenge faced by the Admirals, Generals and Air Marshals of the UNSC is to provide strategic defense to colonies and human interests while remaining flexible to meet threats head on. Associate status with the Citadel has placed an additional burden of participation in several standing galactic military operations such as the Council Demilitarization Enforcement Mission, or CDEM.

Military administration is handled by the UNSC command, or HIGHCOM, headquartered out of Arcturus Station and led by Minister of Defense, Chief of UNSC Forces and a staff of the highest ranking officers from each branch of service. Regional control is handled by Central Commands, or CENTCOM, for each major theater of operations.

The Navy operates the Heavy Fleets, comprised of a Dreadnought Battle Group; Carrier Battle Group; Support Battle Group; and six Patrol Battle Groups. Within these Battle Groups are wings of fighters, interceptors, bombers, dropships and gunships aboard the ships. There are currently ten total fleets with each assigned to a major star cluster claimed by the System Alliance and one fleet held in reserve. These fleets perform patrols within their assigned star cluster in addition to additional duties in less populated star clusters of Systems Alliance space.

The Air Force operates the Light Fleets assigned to highly populated star systems. With the advent of Mass Effect and Slipstream physics the ability to travel rapidly has created a need for control

and order. The Light Fleets are comprised of four patrol groups of frigates; Up to ten fighter wings positioned around the solar system for rapid response; Corvettes and atmospheric vessels patrolling orbits; The Orbital Defense Grid made up of massive orbital and planetary mass acceleration cannons; and guard forces protecting spaceports, space stations and tether elevators. The fleets are responsible for monitoring all traffic within the star system with extra attention paid to the orbit and atmosphere of major worlds. There are currently a total of fourteen Light Fleets in operation by the Air Force protecting the mostly highly populated star systems.

The Marines are found wherever the Navy is and operate the Frontier Divisions. As the Navy is often far away from any populated areas of space they require the assistance of Marine ground forces to board ships and space stations; Perform planetside operations on remote worlds; perform guard duties for Naval facilities and ships; and function as an invasion force. The Marines are also assigned as detachments to low population colonies as ground defense forces until it is found worthwhile to garrison an Army unit permanently. The standard Frontier Division consists of several self contained brigades with a mixture of Light and Mechanized Infantry units. The Marines have ten total divisions with each assigned to a major star cluster alongside the UNSC Navy with one division held in reserve.

The Army serves as the terrestrial ground force that protects and polices highly populated star systems. Their Colonial Divisions are assigned to prevent the ground invasion of a planet and eliminate domestic threats within star systems. Since their job is more defensive in nature the average Colonial Division consists of several self contained brigades with a mixture of Light and Mechanized Infantry units supported by Heavy Armor and Artillery. The UNSC Army currently has fourteen total Colonial Divisions in service protecting highly populated colony worlds with one division held in reserve.

SpecWar is the home of the UNSC's infamous N Series soldiers, known as Orbital Drop Shock Troopers and SPARTANs. Pulled from the ranks of all service branches and all specializations, the candidates who survive the trials of the various stages of the Interplanetary Combatives Training, or ICT, go on to serve in one of the ten SpecWar groups stationed throughout Systems Alliance space. Their high level of training, discipline and access to the best equipment humanity offers allows these groups to engage in a multitude of operations with minimal support. They are truly the go anywhere, accomplish anything force of the human race and have earned the fear and respect of the galaxy.

The final major component of the UNSC is an offshoot of the Navy called the Office of Naval Intelligence, also known as ONI. While once a part of the Navy it has since been decoupled and given it's own branch designation since it serves as the military intelligence and research arm of the UNSC. They work closely with the other branches, particularly SpecWar, as well as several parts of the Systems Alliance government like the CAA, DSC, MTrans, and MI Squared. Despite this cooperation, the Office often sanctions operations and projects on it's own to better facilitate a confidential nature into their clandestine works.

* * *

><p>Codex Entry: Insurrection Wars

The Insurrection Wars are a misleading name. It implies a unified force opposing the Systems Alliance and UNSC, which neither war ever had. The unifying theme of the forces that are labeled as insurrectionists is a general distrust of the Systems Alliance and UNSC. The goals and reasons are varied, with some wanting to force humanity to leave the Citadel Charter, others wishing to gain colonial independence from the Systems Alliance, and a small few groups wishing to overthrow the Systems Alliance. No matter the desired outcome, the insurrectionists typically employ methods of violence, sabotage, espionage and sedition.

Following the Interplanetary War there were several generations that understood the price paid for their peace. The Systems Alliance continued the legacy of the UEG with attempting equitable and fair representation, but the byproduct of interstellar colonization was polarization. The populations of the newly formed colonies sent politicians to both houses on Arcturus Station with demands that more attention be paid to providing assistance to build infrastructure. The well established colonies back in the Sol system unified with the nations of Earth to create a block of opposition so that not all money and efforts were wasted on the new colonies.

This political stalemate continued for decades, growing hot and cold. Combined with the distance between the star systems this polarization quickly gave way to cultural pride and failing support for the Systems Alliance or UNSC. Talk of sedition and secession began to become the norm across colonies and back on Earth. Fearing another Interplanetary War, this time spread out across light years and equipped with far greater technology, the Systems Alliance authorized the UNSC to begin quiet operations to identify and eliminate burgeoning threats.

The increasing tensions would come to a boiling point in 2444 over the Naval blockade of the Fucanglong system in the Paramahansa Sea Cluster. The refinement facility on the asteroid Leviosa was misplacing large quantities of element zero, selenium, and technetium, all monitored materials due to their usage in drive cores and trans light engines. When a freighter leaving the system was boarded by UNSC marines for inspection they were ambushed by rebel forces who quickly dispatched the marines and stormed the UNSC naval vessel, the Callisto. When news of this daring and brazen attack on UNSC forces spread to the rest of the colonies and Earth the First Insurrection War began. The war consisted of series of loosely related flare ups, causing the UNSC grief as they were always one step behind and unable to fully suppress the rebellion without using drastic measure which only served to further alienate the population.

Just as the war seemed to be turning in favor of the UNSC fate intervened with the Turian contact of 2479. The attack on Shanxi created an hasty end to the hostilities between the Systems Alliance, UNSC and the various rebel factions. The entire might and ire of the human race was then focused upon the alien interlopers. The resulting war and armistice opened the human race to an entire galactic community that none knew existed. And for those who still held the grudges of the First Insurrection War, they wished they never

had.

Humanity's acceptance in the Citadel charter as an associate race was seen as a boon by some and an outrage by others. The rebel factions that chafed under the unified and often heavy handed rule of the Systems Alliance grew enraged knowing that now humanity would be subservient to a council of three aliens. The government they loathed wasn't even in charge anymore. The old wounds of the First Insurrection War, hardly healed, were now being picked at by the infections of xenophobia, jingoism and isolationism.

This simmering cauldron of rage would soon explode after the Madrigal SPECTRE incident of 2533. Madrigal, a remote mining colony in the Voyager Cluster, was the scene of a violent chase between Turian SPECTRE Malum Venator and a batarian fugitive that ended in the deaths of seven human colonists. When the Council declared that no charges would be leveled against SPECTRE Venator and that the deaths were an unfortunate side effect of justice the insurrectionist forces now had their rallying cry. The Second Insurrection War would commence on 2536 when human terrorist Ivor Johnstagg attempted to murder the Volus ambassador on the Citadel. Before he was killed he yelled 'Remember Madrigal!'

The war would yet again be a series of flare ups and terrorist attacks by separate forces seeking their own liberation with the added element of the Council closely watching how the Systems Alliance and UNSC handled things. In a strikingly similar fashion to the first, the Second Insurrection War ended with an uneasy truce after an alien force invaded yet another colony. This time the Covenant invasion of Harvest in 2556.

Similarities end there as after the conclusion of the Harvest Campaign, the insurrectionist forces and those sympathetic to their cause saw the inaction of the Council to the invasion of a human planet as the final straw. By 2560 there was a massive exodus of human insurrectionists, sympathizers and disillusioned veterans of the Harvest Campaign into the lawless Traverse and Terminus. Desperate to get away from the control of the Systems Alliance, UNSC and Citadel Council these humans found the threat of the Covenant, Geth, pirates and warlords to be preferable. The unaffiliated human colonies of Anhur, Horizon, Arvuna, Venezia and Trident, as well as handfuls of much smaller locations, are the legacy of this exodus.

* * *

><p>Codex Entry: Interplanetary War

World War Three. The Extinction War. The Interplanetary War. There are some who believe that intelligent, sapient life has a crucial test to pass in it's infancy. Does the species use it's gift of complex thought and problem solving to create a better existence, or does it create better ways to destroy itself? There is evidence throughout the galaxy that some species, including the Krogan, failed this test. It is believed by many that this war was humanity's test.

As conditions worsened on Earth in the late 21st and early 22nd century, tensions increased across the planet. Overpopulation, climate change, and geopolitical instability gave rise to popular political movements. These movements viewed those in power as being

responsible for the mounting problems the human race faced, or at the very least too incompetent to manage them. The political fervor turned protests against the state powers into riots, terrorism, and outright rebellion. Displaced populations fled the war zones and crackdowns as refugees sparking border disputes over the humanitarian crisis. Nations not yet engulfed in the civil unrest became paranoid, refusing entry to those seeking asylum and brutally suppressing any domestic dissent.

The final match was struck in 2160 when two such competing movements, the fascist Friedens and communist Koslovics, staged a series of rebellions on the early settlements across the Sol system. When Koslovic forces from a Russian settlement on Luna engaged their Chinese neighbors it sparked the war. Soon China retaliated with coordinated strikes across Eastern and Central Russia followed by a ground invasion. The Russians would respond with horrific bombardments across the Chinese coastline, killing millions within days. The resulting flood of refugees from Central Asia and China would put pressure on nations already experiencing their own internal problems. A border dispute between refugees crossing from Pakistan into India soon led to those nations joining the chorus of war.

Within a year, war raged across every continent, pitting old rivals against one another. In some instances even former allies or fellow countrymen fought each other for control or remaining resources like clean water and healthy farm land. In South America, socialist guerrillas struck across the borders of Brazil, igniting border skirmishes between the nation and her neighbors. The United States suffered it's Second Civil War, eventually dragging in it's trade and economic alliance partners in Mexico and Canada. Elsewhere governments were toppled or the populace clamored for much needed supplies as the transport of goods and food necessary came to a grinding halt once the global economy stopped flowing.

Without leadership, the various UN peacekeepers and other functions were left to fend for themselves. One group, in a refugee camp just outside of Rio de Janeiro, took matters into their own hands. Arming themselves and the refugees, they managed to bring peace and order to that small corner of the country. Word soon spread throughout South America that there was a place where sanity and civilization still stood. People flocked through the war ravaged continent to find this shelter in the safe zone. Once there they joined the growing military force which would soon wash over the continent, obliterating all those who refused to surrender and end the war.

Absorbing more and more recruits from the masses of the disenfranchised and hopeless, men and women who fought to save humanity from itself, the UN force swept across the globe by 2167. Once peace had been achieved here on Earth, the UN Security Council was reconvened. Under threat from the UN military forces, which now had the popular support of the majority of the human race, the Security Council was disbanded and a new, all inclusive government took it's place. The United Earth Government, or UEG, would give equal representation to all people and all nations of the human race.

The first order of business of the UEG was to formalize the UN military and give it the task of bringing the now rogue colonies throughout the Sol system back under control. The newly christened

United Nations Security Command, or UNSC, began a massive operation to train and equip an elite fighting force capable of taking back the colonists under any conditions. At the same time transport ships were retrofitted to have warship capabilities to assist and deliver these troops.

Beginning with the assault on Luna, the UNSC forces would slowly but surely rout the colonies in brutal displays of power that concluded with the surrender of settlements on the Jovian moon Callisto. Upon completion of the Interplanetary War in 2171, the UEG passed a resolution, known as the Callisto Treaty, which forbid the formation of a military force outside of the UNSC by any local government.

While the measures were seen as draconian by historians and modern critics what can not be argued is that the people of this era saw death and destruction on a scale humanity has never seen since. The final tally for the Interplanetary War, counting not just deaths by warfare but also those who died as a result of starvation, dehydration or disease tied to the war, numbered to nearly two billion by conservative estimates.

To this day there are many places across Earth where memorials have been placed to commemorate the mass graves of those who died during humanity's darkest hour and greatest test.

3. No One Expects The Terminus Invasion

****Author's Note:** This fanfic will be massively AU, combining elements of Mass Effect and Halo together as one with my own additions. I'll try my best to have unique or entertaining takes on things. I can not stress enough that if you're easily upset that events, technologies and characters do not follow canon sources then this fic will not be for you.**

****Again a debt of gratitude to General User on the Bioware forums for his creation of Mindoir which served to inspire me. Thanks also to my beta for being a co conspirator and soundboard for my crazy ideas over the past year. I know you were skeptical when I first pitched this idea but thanks for hearing me out.****

****Warning to readers, my fic will contain some graphic language, scenes and themes. I'm not doing it for shock value but to show how brutal war and violence can be, and more importantly how they can leave scars long after everything has healed. Some of these characters are just not nice people. If you're not comfortable with this I understand.****

* * *

><p>Nouveau Basel, Mindoir, Malawi System, Maroon Sea; May 19th 2570 [Standardized Terran Calendar], 0952 [Local Time, Terran Standard]

Eventually the fields and trees of the farming community gave way to regular construction and prefabricated dwellings that meant we had entered town. We exited at Marktplatz station across from the Konstantestar space elevator facility to the hustle and bustle of people going about their business on a Sunday.

Mindoir was seeing a downswing in investment because of increasing hostility from Terminus forces which in turn was putting pressure on the Systems Alliance to provide funding to the UNSC for the creation of a full compliment of permanent defense forces. The Systems Alliance was reluctant to provide that funding because of political pressure to avoid direct confrontation with the Terminus forces, which everyone knew were aided by the Hegemony. Plus providing a naval fleet, army division or even an orbital defense grid wasn't cheap. So basically no one would do anything until they were forced to.

UNSC Air Force security personnel stood guard outside the elevator facility, flanked by scores of LOKI mechs. That in itself wasn't anything special, but the fact the guards were armed with assault rifles and full body armor gave me pause. Normally they wore their basic uniforms and light armor, armed with only sidearms. To have them fully loaded for combat was unnerving, but then again it wouldn't be the first time. They stood by at their posts, watching everyone with suspicious eyes and nervous hands clutching their weapons.

Moving beyond the station we walked the hundred meters or so of open space near the train and tether stations where locals would unload their harvests from the trains. The CAA and DCS would have them inspected and weighed before loading them onto the elevator to the station and docked freighters above. Nearing the edge of town proper the smells of Bubba J's BBQ and Binder's Fischmarkt made my mouth water. My hunger from earlier spiked thinking of beef ribs and grilled near-tuna but I focused on what needed to be done first.

We were headed to the authorized dealer for the Jotun drones we used. The harvesting models needed an update to their firmware so they complied to whatever inane standards the Alliance or Council thought up this time. In order to do that we needed to have specialized chips fabricated and that was beyond anything that could be done in the workshop back home. I knew there were ways to get around FRM but I'd probably just screw it up and break the drones. Or get us sued by Jotun Industries. Or both.

We took a shortcut through the open air marketplace where locals filled stalls with fresh produce and dairy products. Laid out as a large rectangular park near the elevator, the marketplace was meant to be a future tourist attraction for when the colony grew larger and prestigious enough to actually have people crazy enough to voluntarily visit. The air was full with the smells of Mindoir's efforts. Fruits, veggies, herbs, bread, pastries, and cheeses. All of them playing havoc with my hunger and begging me to try each of them until I was stuffed.

Since just about everyone in Nouveau Basel was in the farming business, bartering was common and the haggling made it sound like vids of the old stock exchanges back on Earth. Say what you will about backwards colonial lifestyle but there wasn't many places in the galaxy where you could get food like this. Most other humans lived on cloned, frozen, dehydrated, or processed foods only. Besides, vat produced cloned food just didn't have the same nutritional value as the real thing. Plus it always tasted like you were chewing on well cooked rubber.

My attention was drawn towards a stall filled with berries of all kinds which could only mean one thing. The Palinkas. I saw a glimpse of Klara smiling and handing a carton of blueberries to a customer. My heart skipped a beat as her blue eyes make contact with mine before she tucked a strand of her raven black tresses behind her ear and gave me a grin. I was frozen in my spot while she eyed me up until someone must have called her name because she turned around and continued her work for her family booth. My own eyes trailed down her figure to the tight, form fitting pants she wore. The spread of her hips and the curve of her backside made me almost growl.

When it dawned on me that I was staring I looked away and rubbed the back of my neck, trying to hide my embarrassment. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Ari giving me a devious smirk and then pointedly looking towards Klara.

No. She wouldn't. Ari's purposeful stride towards the Palinkas' stall gripped me with overwhelming fear. When I saw Klara notice my little sister marching her way she frowned and looked to me, wondering if I was involved. Springing into action I launched myself forward to grab my sister by the wrist and dragged her off before she could do whatever it was she was planning on doing.

Ari managed to wrench her arm free of my grasp by the time we had nearly exited the marketplace, giving me a wide and wicked grin. Continuing along we passed through the streets of the designated 'Old Town' district which was ridiculous given that the colony was only officially older than me by a year, but that was just another facet of preplanned living on a colony. Always thinking ahead, always planning for the future. Like the marketplace, this was a designated commercial zone, with shops that were wildly popular with the locals because, well, you didn't have any alternatives unless you felt like heading up to Konstantestar.

Along the way we greeted people we knew who were going about their business just like us. It was impossible not to know most everyone in a community like this. We went to school together or with their kids. We did business with each other on a regular basis. Hell, since mom was one of the handful of doctors at the local hospital that meant everyone knew who she was. About the only people we didn't know where the UNSC personnel, who pretty much stuck to themselves on their bases spread out across the planet or aboard Konstantestar. Or the LOKI mechs the local police used as patrolmen, but they didn't count since they weren't really people. Not that would ever stop Ari from talking with them to see if the VI had ever been updated to include new greetings.

Going a few more blocks we came to one of the three bridges that spanned the roughly two hundred meter width of the Basel-Rhine River that split the town in two. The far side of the river was what most called 'Real' Nouveau Basel, since this is where most of the residential district was situated. The schools, hospital, emergency responders and administrative offices for the town were located further inland from the river on that side as well.

We crossed along the bridge and I glanced down on the mighty Basel-Rhine. The normally clear water was a muddy brown, meaning rainstorms in the foothills and mountains. Wonderful. It wouldn't be long before the rain started falling here too. The world seemed to be matching my mood perfectly.

On the other side we made a left onto the riverfront promenade, named Augusta Raurica, where restaurants, cafes and the more lucrative businesses in town were. The entire area, like all other aspects of preplanned colonies, was created to evoke the artistic and cultural feel of parts of Earth and it's past in order to remind the people of our home world. In this case, Central Europe, hence the style. Stone railings around the edges of the river and along the bridges stood a meter high before being topped with intricate wrought iron decorative fences. At the edge of each bridge and along every forty meters of the railings, stone posts anchored bronze lamp posts that evoked a look and feel like ancient gas street lamps. Crisscrossing the span between buildings on either side of the river were strings and webs of cable with emitters that would be lit up in the evenings to create the illusion of fireflies, aurora effects or specialized displays for festivals and holidays.

Supposedly it was an incredibly romantic place to take your date. Not that I would know anything about that, of course. The only girls I had dinner with here were my mom and sisters. Somehow I don't think they count unless you're trying to make a joke about the outer colonies and incest. In which case fuck you very much.

We only had to walk a bit before reaching our destination, Karapetian Konnection, specializing in licensed software and firmware as well as sales and repairs for omnitools, terminals and the like. They had no shortage of clients due to the deceptively high amount of automation on Mindoir. Being the only official licensed Jotun service provider in town didn't hurt either.

Stepping inside the shop, we took a moment to bask in the climate controlled cool air of the shop as soon as we walked in. Biggest pain of living in Nouveau Basel was that it was on the equator next to a river at the foot of mountains and a hundred kilometers downwind from the ocean. Hot and humid year round with a light monsoon season which was due to start soon. Hence the need to harvest.

If we were lucky we could squeeze in a trip to the beach after the last load was aboard a freighter and before the storms really kicked in. I know I wouldn't turn down the chance for fun, sun and if I was really lucky, Klara Palinkas in a swimsuit. Provided Ari stayed far, far away, of course. Or was eaten by the damn spider lobsters, the only real predator anyone had to worry about on Mindoir. Either one worked for me.

The store had a very sterile and professional feel that was out of place in the agrarian colony outside of medical facilities. The décor was lots of empty space in brightly lit gray and white tones. Three free standing terminals linked to a fabrication unit on the left wall for self service. A wide assortment of optic gear, audio accessories, omnitools, haptic tools, terminals and datapads for sale or trade lined the right wall. From the cutting edge and new to the used and old, if you wanted it, the owner had it or could get it within a week.

The man in question stood behind a counter at the far end of the room, fiddling with a datapad. Sarkis Karapetian was an average middle aged man in every sense save the excessive tech on his person and the expensive modern wardrobe. A single eye visor adorned his face, a neural interface implant at the base of his neck, an omnitool

lined each wrist and datapad in hand. The man lived and breathed his job.

"Hey Sarkis." His raised finger in a universal 'one second' gesture was the only acknowledgment I got.

He continued to tap away on his datapad as Ari and I stood there in the increasingly awkward silence. As the seconds ticked by I shared a glance with my sister, each of us conveying our incredulity.

Sarkis shocked us both when he slammed the datapad down and let loose an angry string of what I guessed was Armenian curses. My omnitool beeped and flashed as a synthetic female voice in a British accent announced "_Language is an unknown human dialect. Please update your index of languages at your earliest convenience for accurate translations._"

I smiled to hide my mortification as I blindly swatted my omnitool's main function button to deactivate the notification. I had forgotten my translator was running.

He must have found the situation humorous since he broke into chuckles but ended in a weary sigh. Rubbing the stubble on his chin he eyed the datapad balefully before pounding his fist on the counter. "Hey kid. I take it you're here for the pieces that conform with the latest regs? The stuff your dad ordered?"

I nodded at his astute guess while Ari wandered off to look at omnitools. Sarkis snorted as he lambasted the foolishness of bureaucrats. "All you can sell or buy in Council space are VI's. What do they think? A bunch of farming bots are going to turn into the next geth?" He dismissed his rant with a disgusted wave of his hand.

I vaguely recalled the geth from the galactic history lessons in school. True AI's create by a race of idiots that lived full time in environmental suits somewhere in the Terminus. Quirdians? Quardians? Something with a Q. I can never remember despite how many times Mom and my sisters would watch Fleet and Flotilla. Important part was that laws and regulations regarding intelligence programming were draconian because of their mistake.

Sarkis continued to vent his frustrations "And to top it off the entire sector has lost all connection with the rest of the planet. Forget anything outside the system."

I frowned as I digested that tidbit. Guess the connection issues extended beyond my omnitool and the train. But the fact we couldn't communicate with other settlements on Mindoir was troubling. "Are the comm buoys out, too?"

Sarkis shrugged "No clue. Satellite. Tightbeam. Microwave. Nothing is working. It's like the locations are offline." Now it was his turn to frown. "I got in contact with the CAA early this morning because the outage effects my business. They said the Oppidum relay up in the Gran Alps had gone silent. They had the Marine detachment headed there but that was hours ago."

Whoa. Oppidum was a UNSC outpost. If they were sending in the Marines to check out one of their own bases then something serious was

happening. "Is it Luddites? Totenkopf? URF? FLP?"

Sarkis shook his head in exasperation. "Don't know, don't care. Until I get an extranet connection I can't help you or anyone else. Besides... HEY!"

He looked off towards my sister who was playing with a Serrice omnitool. "Put that down! That's the only model I have for that line!"

Ari quickly placed it back and took a step away while protesting her innocence. "I was just looking."

Sarkis slowly nodded his head while sardonically replying "Yeah, I've heard what you can do when just looking with an omnitool."

"Oh my god!" She was chagrined, her eyes wide as saucers as she glared at me accusingly with her hands on her hips.

I threw my hands up in surrender as I made sure not to be in the path between the two of them. Wherever he had heard of her escapades it wasn't from me.

"Your mother came in here last week looking to get you an omnitool." he explained to Ari's delight and my horror. "But she wanted to know what sort of locks and limits could be put on it. She didn't seem to trust you. Explained why."

My horror only grew as I contemplated the repercussions of this. The galaxy might collapse if Ari ever got regular access to a fabricator and the extranet. Mom must be losing her mind.

"Anyways, until I have an extranet connection, I can't help you out, kid." Sarkis picked up his datapad and resumed playing with it. "Maybe a miracle will happen and Vyrant Telecom will get their shit together. Check back later this afternoon."

I nodded in acceptance as I swallowed my annoyance. All this way into town for a possibly wasted trip. This day was getting more and more awesome as it went on.

If I didn't get the chips today I would have to squeeze in installation and maintenance after school this week on top of homework and chores. The whole point was to do it today so me and dad could focus on the drainage systems during the week.

We exited the store and immediately were enveloped again in the hot and heavy air typical of the colony. Having grown up here it was no big deal but today I was close to losing my temper and everything was annoying me.

"Can we get something to drink? I'm thirsty." Ari's question penetrated my brooding thoughts.

Not a bad idea. Maybe we could get something to eat while we were at it. "You want something from here or the marketplace?"

Ari never answered as a group of five UNSC fighters screamed by overhead, flying low and looping around the town.

What the hell?

Just then my omnitool pinged, an emergency message. Looking around I noticed everyone else around us was getting the same messages, opening them up and then beginning to panic. I quickly slipped on my haptic glove and opened my own only to read a warning for the entire colony.

[\\ Colonial Security [A] CAA Mindoir [to] Colonial Registry [A] CAA Mindoir \\]

[\\ Emergency Colonial Messaging System \\]

[\\ _WARNING! Emergency Colonial Messaging System. This is not a drill. All civilians are ordered to remain indoors or report to the nearest designated security site or UNSC base. Unidentified vessels have entered the Malawi system and engaged UNSC forces in orbit and on the surface of Mindoir. Repeat. All civilians are ordered to remain indoors or report to the nearest designated security site or UNSC base. Please access the provided link attached to this message to locate your nearest designated security site or UNSC base. Do not engage hostile forces. _\\]

"What's happening?" Ari was starting to panic, clutching at my side and frantically trying to read the message.

I didn't know what to tell her besides the truth. "I think we're under attack."

On cue a group of UNSC Marines and one piloted exoskeleton appeared on the far side of the river, yelling and screaming for people to get inside. Which of course only inspired a greater panic, with people doing everything but what they were told.

All of that crescendoed when the UNSC fighters came back around, this time rocketing upwards to meet a swarm of vehicles descending from the sky. A pair of UNSC gunships crested over the top of the buildings on this side of the river and hovered nearby.

"Hey, kid! Get inside!" My awestruck and terrified observations were cut short when a Marine came by and forcibly shoved Ari and me back into Sarkis' doorway. We spun to get inside when a loud explosion struck, sending a blast of heat and force into my back. I ducked and cowered in the doorway, using my body to instinctively protect Ari as a second, more noisy explosion was heard, this time raining down debris.

Once I felt safe that the worst had past I looked over my shoulder and saw that an eerie calm had come over the colony. Every person was stunned, as if in a trance, looking to where one of the gunships had careened into the buildings on the far side of the river, smashing itself and everything in it's path to bits before coming to a rest on the river walk. I frowned and wondered what the hell caused that to happen. I didn't have to wait long to find out.

Looking back to the sky I could see the remaining gunship and fighters had engaged the swarm. All around town atmospheric and orbital defense placements activated, targeting the swarm with a barrage of fire from mass acceleration cannons, missile pods and laser turrets. Errant rounds and missiles began showering down from

the attackers as they sought to destroy the defenses. Under cover of the deafening sounds of explosions the real hysteria began, breaking the trance like state that gripped everyone.

One of the vehicles in the swarm, looking like some type of fighter, broke from the rest and began tracing the river, descending lower beneath the torrent of defense fire. It only took a matter of seconds for it to reach the edge of the town, some four kilometers down the river, and begin unleashing hell. It's aim was indiscriminate, launched into automated defense placements, clusters of people and structures with equal abandon.

Seeing the course of destruction the Marine from earlier grabbed the two of us, shoving us to the railing near the river. Seconds later something explosive rocketed into the front of Sarkis' building, caving in the front and sending chunks of debris flying outwards in a deadly shower that ripped through people. The Marine sheltered us with her body, the kinetic barriers of her armor activating to take the brunt of the abuse. She still grunted, some of the debris no doubt making it through and hitting against her composite armor.

As the fighter flew on by the exoskeleton on the far side of the river took aim and fired back, it's own kinetic barriers and armor having stopped a direct hit from a missile. The returned favor sliced through the barriers of the fighter and hit one of the rear thrusters, causing it to begin to fly erratically until it spun out of control, snapping through the web of cables, smashing into the river walk further down and eventually sliding into the river itself.

Our respite was short lived as the swarm had nearly descended upon the town, despite the heroic efforts of the UNSC fighter pilots and lone gunship. The attacking ships scattered and spread out, hovering well above the tallest buildings. Their armaments making short work of the automated defenses, which seemed to be firing less and less frequently as their numbers dwindled. Now that the attackers were closer I could see these were nothing like anything the UNSC or Alliance used. No logos or emblems. Lots of wear and tear covered up by bad paint jobs.

A side door slid open on the nearest vehicle, a gunship of sorts, about fifty meters down the river. A very human like shape in full black body armor and helmet leaned out holding a massive gun with a ridiculously wide barrel.

At the sight of a weapon the marines and exoskeleton took aim, but there were too many of them. Screams, running, and shoving were rampant as the populace not already killed or injured by the first salvo tried to get out of the gunman's sights. The Marine that had protected us stood from her position and began firing on the gunman.

Despite the chaos around me my mind oddly honed in on the details of the ships. This wasn't some insurrectionist attack. It was certainly why the comms were down, but I had the bad feeling this was something much worse than insurrectionists.

A steady, rhythmic 'fwuump' sound could be heard followed by something metallic and slightly hollow bouncing and rolling against things. A dull green canister ricocheted off the second story of the

building across the esplanade, sending chips of cement flying everywhere before landing a handful of meters away from our cover.

The three of us, myself, Ari and the Marine, watched transfixed as it rolled slower and slower towards us. By now I could make out letters and numbers in blockish yellow script. From what I saw it wasn't any human language I'd ever seen before but the Marine seemed to know what it was. She charged it down and punted it down the esplanade, screaming "Gas!"

The canister emitted a shrill beep before both ends explosively popped off and a noxious smelling yellow white gas began streaming out. Even at this distance my eyes and nose burned as I gagged for breath. Besides me Ari frantically clawed at my shoulder as she tried to breath. The Marine had donned a breather system and resumed her weapons fire on the shuttle and it's gunner. As my vision got worse I relied upon my hearing but all I could make out in the midst of my asphyxiation were explosions, gunfire and the screams of the terrified or dying.

Instinctively I pulled Ari along as we crawled on hands and knees towards the bridge while coughing up our lungs. The cacophony of terror and thick haze of gas covered our escape but left us virtually blind as to what was going on around us but judging by the sounds it wasn't good.

That would be remedied the second I pulled my head past the edge of the railing to look down the length of the bridge. The air here was less thick with gas and I could see at least two dozen bodies laid out in various states of brutality as those still alive writhed and screamed in agony. Holes the size of an infant's fist punched through torsos and limbs sheered off by explosive force. Blood pooled and combined to create a slick along the middle of the bridge.

A man and woman ran past us and onto the bridge, trying to reach the other side. He led her by the hand while she trailed behind. They had nearly made it halfway when she was blown to her side as a round punched through her abdomen. The man stopped in his tracks and looked back towards his companion in shock. That is until another round ripped through the back of his skull and out his left cheek, causing his head to explode in a shower of gore that bathed the woman while she lay at his feet clutching the gaping wound in her midsection. His body collapsed in comically slow fashion, knees first, before it twitched uncontrollably. She stared with traumatized wide eyes, her pale face covered in his blood, before two more rounds punched into her chest and throat, knocking her flat on her back.

Even with the Marines fighting back this was a death trap but running towards the buildings on our side of the river without cover might be worse. If we could just crawl against the railing of the bridge we might make it across. From there we make it to the train or road and get home.

A strangled scream caused me to whip my head around and I saw the Marine from earlier writhing on the ground, pulling off her helmet and reaching at her waist line for something. I wasn't sure what had happened until I saw the blood pouring freely from underneath her chestplate, coating her neck and lower jaw crimson. Beyond her I could see the black armor clad figures had made it to the ground and

were focused on exchanging fire with forces on the other side of the river, but it left no doubt in my mind that they had injured the Marine. Near death and furious, she finally grasped what she was looking for, her sidearm, and rolled over to take aim at the nearest of her attackers. She squeezed the trigger, having the element of surprise and tore down her target's shielding quickly in a burst of purple and gold sparks. Two more rounds then pierced into the back of the target's head, spraying a blue mist of blood as they punched out through the front of the black helmet. The attacker's body slumped forward only to be knocked backwards as fire from the other side of the river impacted with the corpse.

One of the comrades of the slain attacker turned their aim on the fallen Marine and unleashed a brutal stream of automatic fire. The weapon's slugs tore down her kinetic barrier and then shredded the Marine, her body twitching before going limp. The pistol in her hands fell as her grip loosened in death.

Witnessing the carnage made the choice easy. I swallowed back a coughing fit before leaning across the post and onto the bridge. I had crawled a few meters when I had the urge to look back and check on Ari. She was still frozen near the post, curled up in a ball staring in horror at the fallen Marine. What was she doing?

She looked at me with tear filled eyes, too overwhelmed and frightened to move. Hugging her knees to her chest she resumed her staring at the Marine's body and her killers, trying her hardest to curl into a tiny ball and hope they didn't see her.

The sound of the shuttle's thrusters grew louder and I panicked looking up and over the railing. The attacking gunship was hovering not too far away now. Through the clearing haze of the gas I could make out at least nine more black armor clad troops jumping out and fanning the area, rifles raised and at the ready.

I ducked back down and made insistent gestures that Ari hurry. Thankfully, she got the hint as she rapidly crawled her way towards me with her eyes closed. Once she got near I resumed my crawling and did my best to block out the pitiful moans and pleas for help from the dying on the bridge. There was nothing I could do.

We stopped at the edge of the bridge railing to assess our options. Across the esplanade on this side of the river the bridge turned into a side street that lead back towards the marketplace. Beyond that was the train station and the main road out into the farm land. All around it looked like the Marines had fallen back or been slaughtered, the hulking wreck of the exoskeleton still smoking and what was left of the pilot's charred body still strapped into the harness. The sounds of gunfire and explosions could be heard echoing from all corners of town.

Taking a glance back to the other side of the bridge, one of the assailants had started moving towards the collection of bodies. Before he saw us he was fired upon by a group of NBPD officers backed up by their LOKI mechs who emerged from a side street on the other side of the river. A golden haze sprung up around him as a kinetic barrier took the brunt of the surprise attack. He rushed forward to lean against the bridge railing for cover as he and his comrades returned fire.

Utilizing the distraction, Ari and I scrambled past the post that marked the end of the bridge railing, bracing our backs against the low stone wall of the river railing. As the shoot out raged on sending errant rounds whizzing over our heads I contemplated our next move. It was an open space of about twenty meters to the side street in front of us. From there we could hide behind the parked cars. But with the attackers on the bridge we'd be seen in seconds.

The gunship drifted directly above us, the heat of the thrusters blowing unbearably hot air down. From our vantage point we saw the large muzzle of its primary weapon beginning peppering a location on the far side of the river. The gunner used short bursts for nearly half a minute before going silent.

An eerie calm settled across the area accompanied by the distant sounds of gunfire, the flow of the river and the dull roar of the gunship's thrusters. Shots rang out again, breaking the silence and I stupidly looked beyond the post, glimpsing the armored figure now walking amongst the bodies on the bridge and placing shots into those that still breathed. Clearly the small battle was over and the attackers were still standing.

A tapping of my shoulder brought me back. Ari was pointing to a small alley between buildings about another forty meters down the river walk. It was better than nothing. Maybe it would lead to another side street, or at worst, an entrance to a building. It was still better than waiting for these people to get closer to our hiding spot.

With Ari leading the way, we crawled along the railing until we were across from our goal. Gathering courage, I took one last look over the railing to see if we were being watched. The figures seemed content to break in doors and storm shops on the other side of the river. The gunship was still hovering over us but was facing the wrong direction. We were in the clear. For now.

I nodded at Ari and held up three fingers. She started intently at them while I counted down to zero.

On my mark, we ran for the alley as I heard a voice yell in a deep, guttural language. Shots rang out yet again and we narrowly made it to the safety of the narrow alley as they rang off the walls around us. We kept running, dodging past recycling and compost bins until we came to the end which emptied onto a cross street. Overhead I heard the thrusters of the gunship as it began searching for us. Quickly looking left then right, I saw no other dangers. Grabbing Ari, I ran to the right, headed for the nearest intersection that I hoped would lead us back towards the marketplace.

We knelt at the edge of the intersection, crouching inside the broken doorway of a clothing shop. There were very few bodies here and there, the handful of unlucky souls. Most of the damage was from busted windows, debris, wrecked vehicles and obvious signs of panic. The gunship completed a circuit over the area before it doubled back to the river, ignoring us. Waiting a moment to make sure we were not being followed, we then continued on. This time making a left as we hugged the buildings and crouched low.

We slowly made our way down a series of streets but maintained our course, the only signs of life we saw were the skirmishes between the remaining UNSC air assets and the attackers. The further along we

got, the more and more bodies and destruction we saw. All were laid out from random automatic fire. Whoever these bastards were, they were indiscriminate and thorough in their carnage.

Clearing another street we froze as a large NBPd mech, a YMIR I think, heavily damaged but still going strong, stomped it's way right past us. It's sensors must have registered our presence because it quickly spun to point the the cannon on it's right arm on it's new targets. Ari stifled a scream and I fell backwards trying to scramble away. The mech disregarded us and returned to stomping along it's course, looking for attackers to engage.

We neared the open air marketplace but the blood curdling screams coming from that direction were enough to stop us in our tracks. Ari and I looked at one another, afraid of what lay in our path. My mind began working overtime, trying to find some sort of pattern or sense to what was happening. Why had they not chased us? It was obvious more of the attackers had been through here. The empty canisters, damage from errant fire and bodies were testament to that. So where had they gone? Something was not right here. Well, besides the entire part where my colony is under siege.

We crept the last block and my suspicions were correct. There was something wrong here. Very wrong. The attackers had taken a large concentration of people and had them all kneeling silently in the marketplace under the threat of aimed weapons. One by one they were grabbing their prisoners, who fought back sobbing and screaming, and drilling something into the base of their skulls. That was where the blood curdling screams were coming from. I flinched as I recognized the father of one of my classmates being manhandled, held firmly while the drilling device bored into his skull. His inarticulate roar of pain made me feel a sympathetic surge of phantom pain, grasping at the back of my own head as I stifled a sob.

Regaining my wits I saw that another handful of the attackers were herding groups of those who had been drilled out of the marketplace towards the train station and space elevator.

One of the attackers had taken off his helmet and I got a good look at him. A batarian. These definitely were not insurrectionists. Observing the various attackers in black armor I noted several that couldn't even be human. Odd shaped heads. Too tall. Too massive. With this many different races working together these had to be Terminus pirates.

With our way to the train and road cut off I was out of ideas except to keep moving west through the town and risk being caught. Behind me Ari poked me. I turned around and she looked frightened at being this close to what was happening but still gestured as if to say 'now what?'

Indeed. Now what?

I looked at several of the sky cars parked along the road but I had no clue how to get past the security systems that locked you out. The vids all made it seem simple, just one hacking program and you were on your way to grand theft VTOL. But in reality the average sky car had so many safety and security systems it would take minutes to steal one even if I knew what I was doing.

Activating my omnitool I tried to call my Mom or Dad, but I still received the no connection error. Obviously the pirates had shut down all communications for the colony after that emergency message so they could attack with impunity.

Wracking my brains for inspiration I suddenly was given the answer as I stared at the sign for Binder's Fischmarkt on the far side of the marketplace with the space elevator rising into the atmosphere behind it. Daniela Vescovi sat next to me in science class and always remarked that the class room smelled like the loading docks in the back of Binder's where she worked as a cashier. Those same loading docks were directly across from the Konstanteststar elevator tether complex. Which was next to the Marktplatz train station and path out of town.

Grabbing Ari, we backtracked and made our way west around the streets that encompassed the marketplace, careful to not be seen and ignoring the screams of pain. We paused at the first intersection and hid inside of a pharmacy, careful to hold back the small hacking coughs leftover from our exposure to that gas as a troop of the pirates escorted another two or three dozen people from the direction of the river walk at gun point to the marketplace.

Once the coast was clear we dashed across the intersection and then crawled over a terrestrial car which had run off the road and into a building, blocking our path. It's driver shot and killed while still behind the wheel, leaving his vehicle to ram a crowd judging by the bodies laying nearby. Pinned between the vehicle and wall was an older woman who looked like she had died already.

Or so I thought. She perked up at the noise and movement as we slid quickly over the hood, her blue eyes glassy and unfocused.
"...p...please..."

My sister and I froze, partly in fear of being caught and partly in fear of not knowing what to do? Please what? I couldn't help her. Even if I got her out... then what? I mean I knew more than a bit of first aid. You can't be the son of a doctor and not know. But she was pinned against the wall. That's a bit beyond basic first aid.

Besides the vehicle wasn't running, and I doubt the driver shut it off before he died. Which meant that I couldn't drive it. Well, maybe I could leverage it? Push it away from the wall enough? But that might cause too much noise. And waste time.

The woman stared at me pitifully, unable to say anything else. I looked away, frustrated and distraught. I couldn't just leave her here. I mean, I had kept crawling on the bridge. I didn't help any of those people. I hadn't bothered to check any of the bodies along the way. I looked at the ones littering the street and sidewalks nearby. How many of them might still be alive? The screams coming from those still alive made me think that those who died here or were close to dying got it easy.

A memory from ages ago about my mother lecturing me over stealing fruit from a neighbor's orchard pushed to the front of my mind. '_Integrity and character are what a person has when no one else is looking._' I snorted to myself, she sure didn't listen to her own advice did she?

I looked back at the pinned woman, staring into her eyes. Guilt and my conscience taking over, I made the decision. I scrambled to brace my back against the wall and place my feet at the front fender of the vehicle. "Ari, watch to see if anyone comes."

"What? We have to go!" Ari was terrified but my non answer and beginning to push with my legs showed her I was serious. She huffed and crawled to a car ten meters away and peered over the trunk, her body language tense and annoyed.

I swallowed back the grunts and roars that felt natural with exertion as I continually pressed my feet against the fender, squeezing a centimeter or two of extra gap space. A few more and I could get her out. I hope.

My thighs and calves strained as one last push rocked free enough space to reach over and grab her leg, pulling her towards me. The woman fell over in a heap, her hips falling into my lap as my arms braced her back and head. She smiled faintly up at me before coughing up blood. She didn't have any major cuts or wounds, but her midsection was warped something fierce. Her lower rib cage look like it had been folded into her chest cavity and her abdomen oddly distorted like everything there had been shifted.

I reached to her left arm and slung it over my right shoulder as I hugged her to me and picked up her legs just above the knees with my other arm. Standing up took some effort, but I managed to carry her bridal style towards Ari. I know I hadn't thought this through fully, but if I could get this woman back to the farm, maybe mom could help her.

My sister took one look at the woman and quickly looked away, her face screwed up in terror and tears at the sight of the woman's body. "Can we go now?"

I nodded, and Ari led the way, her steps fearful and cautious as her head seemed to swivel left and right ever other second.

Crossing to the far side of the street, we made a left at the intersection and began moving towards the outskirts of town, careful to observe everything around us. My back and arms protested carrying the dead weight of the woman but I squeezed my lips together, afraid to let even a breath pass them in case it turned into a cough, grunt or groan.

We made it to the opposite end of the marketplace, creeping around Binder's Fischmarkt to the loading docks. The putrid smell of fish mixed with the oppressive heat of the day to make me want to gag. As if that wasn't bad enough the fantastic luck I had been having all day reared it's head yet again.

Several of the pirates guarded a large trail of people leading from the marketplace and towards the space elevator. Trying to think of what to do next I absently noted there were batarians, krogans, jiralhanae, asari, turians, kig-yar and even some humans in the ranks of the pirates. All around the open space, the bodies of the UNSC Air Force guards were laid out and stripped of armor and weapons. A nauseating weight sunk into my stomach. They were slavers. Nouveau Basel was being attacked for slaves. People I had known my whole life

were going to be taken into the Terminus or Hegemony space to be sold like livestock.

"What are they doing to them?" Ari's voice was soft and scared. She had to know but was probably blindly holding out for some other explanation. I wasn't going to ruin her fantasy for her.

"Doesn't matter." I sighed and knelt down, placing the woman with her back up against the loading dock. I shook my arms to get a feeling other than burning exhaustion back into them. We were hidden behind a pair of sky trucks parked in the loading docks but this had turned into another dead end. Nearby another gunship did a flyby but either didn't see us or didn't care.

Still, we couldn't stay here for long.

I went to grab the woman again but her head lolled to the side and her body followed, slowly sliding to her left until she was lying upon the floor. I shook her once, twice. No response. I felt for a pulse on her neck and wrist. Nothing. She had died.

I didn't even know who she was. She looked familiar enough. Medium build, brown hair, blue eyes. I sighed yet again.

Ari looked on with pity. She opened her mouth to say something but was cut off by a female voice with a foreign sounding accent. "We know you're there. Come out and we won't have to kill you."

We froze. Someone had seen us.

Thinking quickly I noticed the stairs for the loading dock less than ten meters beyond the safety of the sky trucks. With luck, the back doors to Binder's were open and we could make a run for it through the front. It wasn't a good plan, but it was a plan.

Pointing to the stairs I prepared for a fight. They had the advantage of weapons, but if they got in close I was going to hit them with everything I had. Once again I counted down from three and once again, Ari and I broke into a dead sprint.

Only this time, a batarian was waiting for us. He had been positioned outside of our view on the other side of the farthest sky truck nearest the stairs. Stepping into our path he swung a baton that crackled with electricity at Ari's head and luckily she ducked and kept running.

I took advantage of his swing and a miss to lower my left shoulder into his midsection and tackle him to the floor. A wild haymaker with my right smashed dead center between his four eyes, dazing him and loosening his grip on the baton. I grabbed it and jabbed it at his neck and he spasmed as volts of electricity coursed through his body.

"Don't. Move. Human." The female voice was back and it had pressed a muzzle to the base of my neck.

I never got to say anything else as a wild girlish roar bellowed from behind the both of us. Ari leaped from the loading dock onto the back of the person holding me at gunpoint. I turned to see her savagely kicking and punching at the unprotected rear of our

attacker, an asari. Thankfully the pistol never went off in the process.

The asari shrugged off the blows and expertly backhanded Ari with her left fist, knocking her backwards into the loading dock. I took the opportunity of her divided attention to stab the baton at her but she knocked it aside with the barrel of her pistol before snap kicking me with her left leg.

Recoiling and grasping my throbbing abdomen I was able to see that we had drawn attention from the other guards and the mass of people being filed to the elevator. I could see from my vantage point on the floor that a few of the pirates had started heading our direction, failing to pay attention to their charges.

I suppose our bit of defiance had sparked enough courage in the rest because a handful of the people charged the pirates. Shots and yells rang out as close quarter melees erupted with several people piling upon individual pirates.

My asari opponent looked on with narrowed eyes before glaring at me. She muttered something in asari before raising her pistol to shoot me. My omnitool beeped and flashed as yet again my translator program did it's job. "_Asari, Illium-Omega dialect; You bastard child of a night wind demon._"

She frowned, caught off guard by the odd interruption to her execution. Before she could refocus Ari jumped onto her back again, this time grabbing onto her scalp fringes and yanking back. With the asari's neck exposed, Ari leaned forward, bared her teeth and took a savage chunk out like a wild animal. Purple blood squirted out of the wound and sprayed the side of the sky truck in some avant-garde art display as the asari dropped her weapon and clutched her throat.

Ari fell off and spit the offending piece of flesh out and wiped her lips with the hem of her shirt leaving a purple smear across her chin and right cheek. Her eyes held a fierce and almost feral satisfaction as the asari dropped to her knees, fumbling for something in the pouches on her waist.

I didn't give her anytime to find it as I picked up the baton and shoved it into her chest. She looked at me with pleading eyes as the shock dulled her senses before collapsing to the floor and an expanding pool of her own purple blood.

Looking back at the full blown riot, most of the pirates had been taken down but now the shuttles and gunships were flying overhead. Their side doors open as gunners once again fired the canisters of gas to pacify and disorient the crowd. Those who had commandeered weapons were firing for naught, unable to bring them down without something heavier.

The crowd was dispersing back into the safety of the buildings of town, with a handful of people headed our way. Back in the marketplace, the sounds of rioting and carnage could be heard anew as maybe the people there were fighting back. At least I hoped so.

I quickly picked up the asari's pistol before anyone else could and handed the baton off to Ari. She took a few experimental swings with it before nodding to herself as it met some sort of requirements.

We ran up the dock stairs and opened the back doors to Binder's, the positively lovely smell Daniela complained about greeting us. We stood and looked around for threats but were pushed aside as the crowd had now caught up with us.

They stormed past, picking up anything that could be used as a weapon and continued to the front of the store. Ari and I were content to let them go first. We'd done enough risking of our own lives.

Giving the pistol I had taken from the dead asari a quick glance I was relieved to see that it was some sort of Terminus knock off. I quickly paired it to my omnitool like I had seen dad do with the rifle he owned and was rewarded when it activated, ready to use.

I glanced at Ari to see if she was okay. Her hair had come loose from the ponytail it had been in, the illuminated threads looking out of place now. Her skin was sweaty and grimy. She had the beginning of a bruise just below her left eye where the asari had hit her and she drying purple blood that was starting to flake on her lips and cheeks. "You alright?"

Her eyes looked up at me annoyed "I just fucking bit an asari. What do you think?"

She was freaking out now that it had settled into her mind what she had done. Not that I wasn't freaking out myself. My baby sister had just saved my life by mauling an asari. With her teeth. As if Ari couldn't get even more frightening.

Still, I couldn't help but joke at the situation, "Just don't bite me, alright?"

She glared but the corners of her mouth lifted. Success.

I pulled her close and hugged her to show my thanks. She wrapped her arms around my torso tightly and hugged back, making the tender bruise from where the asari had kicked me throb.

"C'mon. Let's get out of here." She nodded and we continued to the front of the fish market. By now everyone had left so the place was empty. Holding tanks filled with fish and crustaceans bubbled and the soft sound of background music from the store's entertainment system interspersed with reminders for sales in the store could be heard.

Shelves and displays were knocked over, spilling contents to the floor and leaving a pungent odor. Still, no bodies. I guess they had taken everyone peacefully in the store?

Creeping forward through an aisle with sauces and marinades for seafood we came to a stop. We could clearly see the front of the store and through the smashed out glass windows the marketplace beyond. The sounds of gunfire could be heard in the distance. People were still fighting back, but the marketplace itself was empty bar for a handful of bodies mixed in amongst the stalls and small grass field of the park. Upon closer observation, several of the bodies had small... spears? Javelins? Whatever they were they were sticking out of them.

Edging closer all of the bodies seem to spread out from the front of the store. Looking around I now noticed a handful of the same small spike like objects lodged into stalls or the grass. All at an upward angle.

No sooner had I noticed that than a loud whizzing sound was heard as something flew past my right ear so fast I couldn't react. It slammed into a row of saucers farther back, causing them to shatter and explode white droplets of tartar and shards of glass everywhere.

Ari screamed and we both jumped back, scrambling to get deeper into the store.

Breathing heavily after my second close brush with death I examined my ear to check for blood. Seeing none on my fingers I concluded that perhaps my luck had a strange sense of humor today.

With that path cut off, we doubled back to the loading dock. Checking through the windows on the doors I saw the area around the space elevator was clear of gas and pirates. They must still be chasing down everyone in town.

Figuring we had nothing to lose by running I quickly formulated another half assed plan. We would run for the train rails and follow them out of town. As soon as we were past Nouveau Basel proper, we would move over to the levees and aqueducts that separated the river from the farms.

I quickly relayed my idea to Ari. "We're going to follow the train rails back home until we can run for the aqueducts. From there we follow those until we can branch off to the one that feeds into our farm. Okay?"

She narrowed her eyes as she thought about it before nodding her consent.

Pistol raised, as if I knew what I was doing with it, we opened the loading dock door and slowly made our way down. Pausing at the edge of the docks we scanned the skies and area for threats. The bodies of the dead were strewn about haphazardly. The asari that we had taken out lay peacefully in a pool of her own purple blood but the batarian was gone. Seeing nothing that could be considered a threat, we made a mad dash across the open hundred meters or so for the Marktplatz station.

My heart pounded with each step and lungs burned with each breath as I worried it would be my last. As we drew near the platform I glanced over my shoulder to see shuttles and gunships flying back and forth over town. For the time being they were preoccupied and we were safe.

From pirates at least. I never said anything about my own feet, which betrayed me for a second time today as I tripped over a rail and went flying head first into the dirt.

Not even pausing for self pity or pain I scrambled to my feet and joined Ari on the far side of the platform, both of us sitting down and leaning against the station as we caught our breath. I wiped my face and found some blood mixing with sweat and dirt to create a sort of mud. I pulled the hem of my shirt up to clean myself. A spot above

my left eyebrow stung as it made contact and I pulled back, observing a large bloody mark that corresponded with the position of the pain and a smaller one that was about where my lips were.

Sucking on my bottom lip I was rewarded with coppery taste of blood. Great. All this and I get the most injured by my own clumsiness.

Ari frowned at me before shaking her head "Seriously? Twice?"

I grimaced and shrugged, still too embarrassed and annoyed to say much. I nudged her with my elbow and nodded my head in the general direction of home. We had quite a walk ahead of us.

She got the hint and we prepared to start jogging to leave town behind.

* * *

><p>Nouveau Basel, Mindoir, Malawi System, Maroon Sea; May 19th 2570 [Standardized Terran Calendar], 1517 [Local Time, Terran Standard]

We had been walking along the trench of the aqueduct for nearly four hours now. Luckily we had the cool fresh water of the aqueduct to drink and clean ourselves off with but our stomachs grumbled and feet hurt as the adrenaline had worn off long ago. Thankfully we had the foresight to wear boots instead of trainers.

Then again, does anyone start their day thinking, '_What should I wear today that is fashionable, sensible and would be handy if Terminus pirates attack?_' Of course not. Because no one ever expects the Terminus Invasion.

"How much longer?" Ari had asked this question almost every fifteen minutes starting about two hours ago.

I crawled up the side of the trench to get a better view of where we were only to be pleasantly surprised. We had already passed the station near our house. The next gate would mark the sub system that fed water into our sector of farms.

Taking a glance skyward I noticed no shuttles or gunships in the air. We had only seen one that seemed to be chasing a sky car, but that was not long after we made it to the aqueducts.

Turning around I slide down the slope of the trench only to frown at Ari who was sitting down next to the edge of the water and jabbing the tip of the stun baton into the water to see what happened.

She looked up at me with a sheepish grin before doing it one more time.

Shaking my head at her antics I couldn't help but appreciate the levity. "We're almost there."

She pouted and skeptically replied "You said that ages ago too."

I rolled my eyes and waved her on "I mean it this time. The next junction is the one that leads to our house."

Immediately she perked up at the news "Really?"

I nodded and smiled. "Yeah, so hurry up." With that I turned and continued marching along the side of the trench. Ari stood and fell in step behind in me.

In a matter of minutes we were at the gated junction, marked AF-S312. Since the gate was designed to keep large animals and debris out of the water system we couldn't slip past it. But it was easy enough to climb out of the main trench and jump into the feeder aqueduct.

This system was smaller and narrower, forcing us to actually walk in the water. It came up to my hips and to Ari's stomach so it was manageable but slow going. The sloshing made plenty of noise so we would stop every few meters to listen for shuttles or pirates before pressing on.

We had managed to make it midway past Sprague's farm when we stopped in our tracks, hearing arguing coming from ahead. The narrow canal gave us a straightforward view for kilometers so the owners of the voices had to be up on either side of the aqueduct. They were speaking in a human sounding language, but that asari had spoken in a human language as well. We couldn't be sure.

I leaned to the side of the canal and reached up to the edge to lift myself up slowly, making as little noise as possible. Peering over the top I saw nothing but the fields of Sprague's farm in all directions. Twisting my head to look behind me, I saw nothing but the Nash family's farm.

No one. Not a soul.

I was about to let go and slide back down into the canal when a distortion in the air on Sprague's side caught my eye. It was like when you look off into the distance on a hot day and everything looks wavy and watery. Heat haze. The mirage effect.

Only this one seemed to be standing several meters away, just in front of Sprague's field of herbs.

Feeling nervous, I pulled the pistol from my waistband and aimed it vaguely in the direction of the distortion. Just as quickly, a red laser was aimed at my face from the distortion as it slowly washed away.

In its place was a dark skinned Asian woman wearing some kind of black colored armor with a beige diamond emblem over her left breast. She was leveling a military grade assault rifle at me, its laser range finder showing my nose would be the entry point of the last thing I ever saw. "You don't want to do that."

I nodded dumbly and placed the pistol on the edge. The woman nodded and lowered her weapon, motioning me to stand up. "You can tell your friend she can come out too."

My face froze, trying not to betray any knowledge of what she was talking about but the woman was having none of it. "The quicker you two get out of there, the quicker we get out of sight. Hurry up."

Below me Ari huffed and mumbled "Help me up."

After securing Ari's baton, the woman led us further down the dirt pathway next to the canal and towards the shed that housed the pumps for the irrigation system on Sprague's property. She quickly opened the door and motioned us in before following us. With the door closed it was pitch black inside the cramped room save for a glowing red dot that bobbed around and the orange glow of a terminal. The place was noisy and filled with smoke but a growling voice I knew was easy to hear over the din.

"What are you doing bringing in strays, Suhailah?" Old Man Sprague. Sure, because this day couldn't possibly get worse, right?

The woman, Suhailah, replied from somewhere to my left in the dark. "They're children. You expected me to leave them to die?"

"I expect you to do your job and as you are told, you fucking idiot." Ah, that lovely Sprague charm.

A drop light was activated that bathed the room in harsh white luminescence forcing me to shield my eyes. After blinking, once, twice, thrice, I still had flashes and globs of abstract colors in my vision. To make it worse, the light seemed to illuminate the extraordinary amount of dust and smoke floating in the air, which may or may not have triggered a coughing fit from me. Ari didn't seem to be faring any better.

Old Man Sprague sat atop a work bench at the far end of the room, a set of armor not unlike the woman's adorning his tall, lanky frame. His trusty ancient shotgun perched on his lap while he smoked a cigarette. To the right a Latino man in the same armor was bent over some large portable terminal.

Sprague sneered at the sight of us. "Well this fucking figures. Colony's going to shit but I have to run into the two of you one last time." He ground his cigarette into the work bench, putting out it's ember against the metal before looking over at the Latino man. "What about you, Ramirez? Is one of you going to be competent today?"

The man, Ramirez I suppose, ignored him and continued to work diligently.

"We haven't heard from leadership yet?" Suhailah asked with a frown. She leaned back against the wall of the shed and held the rifle loosely in her arms. She looked exhausted and worn down, her face and hair sweaty.

Standing up and shaking his head, Sprague replied. "No, and if Ramirez doesn't move his ass then I am making the call and initiating a purge."

The woman pointed her weapon towards Ari and myself. "What about them?"

He shrugged before staring with cold hatred at Ari "You brought them here. You deal with them. Although I'd watch the little bitch. Nasty little shit."

Besides me Ari snarled back, eager to continue her discussion with

the man from years ago.

Suhailah bristled at something he said because she voiced her dissent with more than a little heat "This is unacceptable. I didn't join to stand by while aliens execute humans in order to protect drug dealers."

"Tough shit, princess. I didn't join to live on some backwards fucking colony where the best pussy is some farmer's underage daughter. We make due with what we have and follow orders." Sprague pinned her with an ice cold glare "Or else."

"Got it!" Ramirez broke the tension of the room. He looked up from the terminal with a cocky grin.

Sprague snatch up an earpiece from the workbench and put it in his ear. He stood motionless, eyes staring off into the distance as he tapped his fingers against the metal counter top. A moment later he began speaking to the ether with a frown "Who the fuck is this?"

His frown distorted into a confused grimace "I don't give a shit about proper clearance codes. This is Operation Bacchanalia initiating a purge. I repeat, initiating a purge. The fucking colony is being over run by goddamn Terminus shit stains."

Everyone in the room sat in slack jawed awe of the spectacle on display. Even Ari seemed impressed.

His grimace became a look of pure annoyance "Look, you stupid kangaroo cunt. You can take your protocol and shove it up your Aussie ass. Inform Tim."

He paused for a moment before becoming sarcastically calm. "Then find me someone who doesn't have their head down under and can get in contact with him, bitch."

He snarled at a figure not present "Let me set this straight for you, you inbred wombat fornicating outback sperm receptacle. The Terminus jackass squad are either torching or pillaging what we have as we speak. If they're not, then the UNSC certainly will when they show up in force within the next goddamn 24 hours. Now you can pass this message along to whoever it is your fancy fucking protocol dictates, but make sure Tim knows. We are purging."

He paused yet again before become sickeningly sweet "Thank you. G'day, mate. Now go fuck yourself with a wallaby, you Tasmanian dipshit." He terminated the call and tore the earpiece out. "Pack it up. We move out in five."

Ramirez nodded, deactivating the terminal before stuffing it into a hard case backpack which he slung over his shoulders.

Sprague bent down below the workbench to pull away the lid to a false floor stash. Large, brick shaped blocks were being pulled out and stacked to his side as he found a rhythm of retrieving objects from below.

I hesitated for a moment, not really wanting to be the subject of his ire, before asking the obvious "So, is it alright that we go?"

Without looking up Sprague replied "The two of you can go skipping through my fields hand in hand singing the hills are alive with the sound of music for all I give a shit."

After an awkward beat of silence, Sprague looked at all the occupants of the shed before shaking his head. "Fucking kids these days. No appreciation for the classics."

Sprague spared another glance at the two of us before snorting and continuing to pull bricks from the hiding spot. Suhailah shook her head at the man before handing me back my pistol and Ari her baton.

Without a word I grabbed Ari's hand and led her out of the shed. Of course, all things being screwed up for the day, Ari couldn't resist a parting shot with her sparring partner. "You're a shit eating reptile that fucks it's own mother. Asshole."

The chuckles of Suhailah and Ramirez were quickly cut off by the automatic closing of the door. I stared at Ari in exasperation. "He could have shot you, idiot."

She glared at me before walking over to the canal and hopping down into it's waters, forging ahead towards our farm. Ari's behavior was becoming increasingly erratic since the bridge and in some ways I feared she might not be all there for the moment. Running for your life and taking a bite out of an asari could screw with your mind just a bit.

At least we were close to home. Once we got to our parent's she would be out of my hands and they could deal with her. With luck we could pile into mom's sky car and head towards the mountains and foothills to hide until the UNSC showed up.

We walked for another ten minutes or so before reaching the edges of our cornfields. We pulled ourselves out of the canal and crept through the tall stalks on our way to the orchards behind the house. The leaves seemed to crack and rattle with every touch, putting me on edge as it sounded loud and obvious to my ears.

Nearing the orchards we heard the harsh tones of batarians speaking in their native tongue. My heart began racing as a blossoming fear spread through my chest. Thankfully I had finally deactivated my translation software.

Please don't let them be dead. Please don't let them be dead.

I got on all fours to crawl the final few meters and peer through the thinning stalks that only partially obscured my view now.

Further down the rows of trees I could see a pair of batarians looking for something... or someone.

I pulled back as I wracked my mind for the best way to help us and whoever might be hiding. Maybe I could offer myself as bait? Lead them on a wild goose chase through the property while Ari got to our parents and ran?

No, that was stupid. Our parents might have already run and that

would leave Ari alone looking for them while I ran around for nothing. Or maybe they had our parents already and were looking for us? They probably saw holos and evidence of kids living here and figured we had run?

Maybe I could double back and get Sprague and his... friends? Companions? Whatever. Get them to help? They had guns and seemed to know what they were doing with them. At least better than I did with this pistol.

But then if they had our parents they might execute them or have taken off by the time we could convince Sprague to help and come back.

Staring at the dirt centimeters from my face I felt frustration and exhaustion creep into me. I didn't know what to do. Looking back at Ari, with her scared and concerned face, I realized we had only come this far due to sheer luck and some insane stunts. We weren't soldiers. We were just farm kids. We only understood school and harvests.

Harvests.

That's it!

Quickly I perked up as I activated my omnitool and quickly set it to silent. Accessing the improved harvesting program I had installed nearly two years ago, I had complete control of drones we stored the in the garage between harvests. Selecting the cornfields and the orchards, I remotely triggered the drones to begin harvesting. One by one, the two dozen drones flew out of the garage and to their preprogrammed tasks.

The interlopers on our land flew into a panic, shooting several of the drones on instinct before realizing that someone had set the drones off. They ran towards the garage without a glance back, leaving the coast clear for me and Ari to move forward.

The drones and their noisy work made for the perfect diversion as we were able to reach the edge of the orchards in minutes despite still being cautious and deliberately slow in our movements. By now, we could see the back of the house and the garage adjacent to it on the right. In the gap between the two the family cars were still parked. If our parents were gone it was on foot.

Or so I thought. The batarians milling about the garage now numbered six, but near the house, a lone figure laid on the dirt and gravel that covered the ground. The thick, curly tangle of dark brown hair was hard to miss. It was the same hair both of my sisters had. A family trait they had inherited from my mother.

I blinked as I tried to process what I was seeing. Maybe she was hurt? Or unconscious? Maybe they had stunned her? Or drilled into her head like the people at the marketplace?

One of the batarians, bigger than the others and clearly in charge, barked something in their language before pointing towards mom. A lone batarian peeled off the group and walked up to her and scanned her with his omnitool. Not finding what he was looking for he toed her body with his boot, flipping her over onto her back before

checking her left wrist. He knelt down and then yelled something back to the others, informing of what he found.

I'm not sure I processed that, because all I could see were my mother's hazel eyes. Vacant and dead. Staring off into the distance. The same eyes I had trouble looking at this morning. The same ones I couldn't tear my own eyes away from now.

Ari saw it too because she began silently sobbing besides me and saying 'mama' over and over again.

I felt shame and anguish as tears tracked down my face. I had been such an ass to her this morning. That was the last memory of me she had. That would be the last memory I had of her. All the anger and tension over her affair. Now she was dead. Killed by fucking four eyed Terminus trash. Just like the people on the bridge. The people across town. That woman I had tried to help.

Fucking pirates.

Fucking goddamn batarians.

The anguish gave way to rage as I stared at the group of batarians near the barn. I didn't think. I acted. Stupid. Rash. Vengeful. Hatred. My pistol was up and aiming at the crowd of them before I could even blink and firing wildly into their gathering.

They ducked and dived as their shields sparked with golden flashes from my erratic fire. All too soon, we were under return fire. Ari shrieked as we both scampered back deeper into the orchards.

Fuck. Stupid. Stupid. Stupid! I just put us both in danger. I let my anger get the best of me, even if it was justified, but now we might be joining our mother in death. I couldn't let that happen. Not to Ari. Not if I could help it.

Ari could double back to Sprague's while I would lead them on a wild chase in the other direction and hopefully she would make it.

"Run back to Sprague's, now." She looked at me confused, her eyes still tear stricken from seeing our mother. We both were still moving fairly fast through the trees and I hissed loudly. "I'm going to make them chase me to the other side of the farm. I'll meet up with you later."

Ari was terrified as she came to a stop. "No! You'll die too!"

I shook my head. I knew I stood no chance, but if I died and Ari got away then it was worth it. "I'll be fine. I'll try to get there soon."

The shouts of our pursuers could be heard getting closer. We'd been lucky enough as it is to have the drones masking much of the noise we made but the batarians would be upon us in seconds. "Go! Now Ari!"

She was conflicted for a second before lunging forward to hug me. She kissed me on the cheek and quickly pivoted on her heel, charging forward to the edge of the orchards and the beginning of the cornfields. I saw her leggings and boots disappear into the stalks

and she was gone.

I waited for the batarians to see me, give them something to chase. It didn't take long before one spotted me and took a shot, hitting the bark of the tree I was hiding behind, shattering it and sending bits of bark, chips of wooden splinters and pulp everywhere. A few bits lodged into my left tricep as I reflexively lifted my arm to shield my face. Growling in pain I fired blindly around the tree to piss them off.

Now that I had their attention it would be a very good idea to run.

Making a mad dash as they repeatedly fired at me whenever they felt they had a clear shot was getting exhausting. I would zig and then zag. Loop through columns and rows of trees. But now I was nearing the edge of the property and the canal again. I could hop the canal and lead them on a chase through the Tolbert property on the other side, but that might leave me in the open for a few seconds too long.

Although a few more seconds on this side and I was done. Quickly, making my decision I braced my fatigued legs for one more effort as I put on a burst of speed in order to clear the canal.

As I broke the treeline at the edge of our farm a flash of something long and dark swung out from my left and into my chest. My feet still propelled me forward but my upper body was already falling backwards from the harsh blow. I couldn't breath as the blue sky with dark thunderclouds slowly rolled into view. My head and upper back slammed into the ground with enough force to cause me to black out for a second only to refocus on a batarian holding an long and odd looking rifle, the muzzle aimed at my face.

He barked something at me in batarian but I was having a hard time understanding between the inability to breath, the world spinning and everything sounding far away and muffled.

Yelling the same phrase again, he moved the muzzle to the left of my head and fired, a long narrow spike burying itself into the ground as dirt and pebbles peppered my face. It stung but the pain seemed so muted.

Pointing the muzzle at my face again I took the time to look at the face of the batarian who was threatening me. I couldn't tell them apart, but this one seemed familiar. It only took me a second to notice the burn mark on his neck and the swollen bruising between his four eyes were my handy work. Hey, it's my old buddy from the loading docks.

Chances are he wasn't thrilled to see me. But why hadn't he just killed me? I looked at the spike in the ground and recognized it as the same ones I had seen from the marketplace. A kick to the head blurred my vision and sent the world spinning again.

Almost as a conditioned reflex, I focused my mind on the spike next to me and willed my body to relax. With a lazy gesture from my left hand my world exploded in pain and a static electric shock. Purple clouded everything and a second spike rocketed home a meter to the right of my head.

Then all was quiet. No more yelling, no more shooting, no more kicks to the head.

After a moment, I opened my eyes to no muzzle in my face. Sitting up I looked behind me, having to brace myself as nausea and dizziness overwhelmed me. When the moment of discomfort passed, I was looking at a dead batarian. A spike lodged under his chin, buried far enough to reach his brain.

Looking first to my left and then my right I confirmed what I think I had done. I had biotically sent the first spike he fired into his head. He must have fired the second spike in his death spasm and somehow it hadn't wound up in my own head. Now I was positive my luck had a strange sense of humor.

Not sure where the rest of his friends were, I gathered his rifle and the the pistol I had acquired earlier. No sooner than I had begun to stumble towards the canal when another batarian emerged from the orchards, his rifle trained on me.

He took one glance at his fallen comrade and the rifle in my arms before snarling and opening fire. I did the only sensible thing I could do. I took a step backwards in a panic and fell into the canal.

Note to self for future reference, falling backwards is a sure way to aggravate any head inures you already have. The third major strike to my head of the day was followed by the disorienting and frightening feeling of falling into water without preparing a breath. I awkwardly surfaced and breathed in greedy gulps of breath. The batarian had run up to the edge, weapon trained but miraculously I had held my own rifle and it was already aimed perfectly at him. I let it rip.

The spike hammered into his shields, causing him to raise his weapon and arms in fear. I guess the size or nearly point blank range made it impossible for spike to be stopped completely as it dug into his collar, through the plating there and into the flesh beneath. There was a sickly sounding squelch and followed by a roar of pain. The batarian fell to his knees and grabbed the spike with both hands, straining to wrench it free.

I took the opportunity to climb out of the canal and kick away his rifle. Training my own rifle on the injured alien I wanted so badly to put another spike through his skull. He looked up at me with hate filled eyes as he still struggled with the spike lodged in his collar.

My hands trembled as I couldn't do it. I wanted to avenge my mother and everyone else but I didn't have it in me to shoot someone while they were looking at me. I yelled, tears starting to form as my throbbing head urged me to do nothing more than to lay down and sleep. "Don't look at me!"

I aggressively edged the rifle towards him in a threatening manner, but he didn't budge. Just continued to work on the spike and stare at me with rage, a small vicious smile forming on his lips.

He must have taken my fear as an invitation as he quickly aimed his right gauntlet at me. Before I could react, a trio of blades ejected

from his gauntlet and shredded my ribcage, leaving nasty gashes across my right side. Falling backwards I screamed in pain, only to see his omnitool charging some manner of electrical attack.

On instinct I rolled to my right, over my wounded ribs, and evaded a sparking net of white that scorched the ground I once occupied.

Lifting the rifle in my arms, I fired once more, into his exposed flank. This time his cries tapered off into tears and whimpering, but still the rage was in his eyes. If anything, it was worse, only now clouded with pain.

We held a staring contest for several heartbeats before I stood and swung the rifle by it's barrel, the stock cracking against his head. I roared in rage hitting two more times until he was slumped forward and unconscious, propped up by the spikes in his collar and left flank. Figuring there was no way he would survive the blood loss, I picked up his rifle and tossed it into the canal. I turned and began a slow trot towards Sprague's farm.

After an embarrassing fence jump and what seemed like forever, I had made it to my destination. I activated the door mechanism but it was empty inside. No Ari, no Sprague, nothing.

I wandered towards his house, calling out periodically for anyone, but still nothing. No sky car, no terrestrial vehicle. Did they leave without me?

I felt scared and alone but resolved to wait. I told Ari to meet me at Sprague's shed and that's where I would wait.

Trudging the rest of the way I felt the day's exploits and my injuries catch up with me. Squeezing my right arm against the wounds on my ribs I was going to take a nap and hopefully she would show up.

* * *

><p>Nouveau Basel, Mindoir, Malawi System, Maroon Sea; May 19th 2570 [Standardized Terran Calendar], 2333 [Local Time, Terran Standard]

I was awakened several hours later by my omnitool pinging an incoming message.

[\ Colonial Security [A] CAA Mindoir [to] Colonial Registry [A] CAA Mindoir \]

[\ Martial Law \]

[\ _The UNSC 6th Fleet Carrier Battle Group and members of the 15th Marine Frontier Division have secured Mindoir and the Malawi system. Martial law has been established for the time being and a curfew is in place except for those needing to return to their homes. If you are unable to reach a major settlement on your own or require emergency medical assistance please activate the tracer program attached with this message and UNSC forces will retrieve you._ \]

This sounded suspiciously like a trap. How long had I been out? And why wasn't Ari here? Standing up I winced as the scabbed and raw wounds in my ribs burned and stung.

I opened the door and the darkness of a night sky dotted with the thousands of twinkling stars of our galaxy greeted me. The smell of rain lingered in the air and muddy puddles filled the ground. Looking off towards the Gran Alps I could see streaks of lightning crackling in the clouds that still lingered there.

Figuring it was worth the risk to find out if this alert was real, I activated the trace before slipping my omnitool off. I placed it on the workbench in Sprague's shed and then grabbed my rifle and pistol, clumsily jumping into the canal and across to the Nash family farm. I moved about sixty meters or so and hid low in their muddy fields of flax.

Without an omnitool I had no clue how long they took, but my best estimate was fifteen minutes later a UNSC dropship arrived, searchlights flooding Sprague's field before homing in on the shed.

It set down fifty meters away from the shed, right in the middle of Sprague's field, kicking up debris that got into my eyes even at this distance. Going off the light given by the ion thrusters and searchlights, roughly a dozen soldiers moved from the dropship and slowly made their way to the shed, weapons raised.

"UNSC Marines, it's safe. You can come out." I could hear the voice over the dull roar of the Pelican's engines. Feeling this wasn't some elaborate ruse, I stood slowly, favoring my ribs and shouldered the rifle, careful not to look like a threat.

I made it a few steps before several laser sights were aimed on me "Drop the weapon!"

I chucked the rifle to the side and raised my hands in the air, wincing as my injuries flared up. A pair of marines leaped across the canal and tackled me to the ground, restraining my hands behind my back. I groaned as a knee was jammed into my back, rubbing my wounds into a muddy bed of snapped stems of flax. They searched me and found the pistol, tossing it to the side. Placing quickly fabricated plastic manacles on my wrists, they lifted me up from the ground and escorted me to the edge of the canal. One of the marines doubled back and recovered my rifle and pistol.

They pushed me into the canal and then another set of hands dragged me up, the cooler night air making my wet clothes feel freezing. Leading me into the troop bay of the dropship, the marines left me there under guard while they searched the area. Several minutes later they all boarded and we lifted off.

One of the marines sat across from me and removed his helmet. By the red lighting inside the troop bay I could see he was a young Latino man, with short hair and a face full of stubble. His honey colored eyes examined me under the red lighting of the cargo bay. "Got a name, son?"

I nodded, cleared my throat of what felt like a massive amount of phlegm and spoke "Luis Vincent Shepard."

He nodded and stood, taking out a knife. For a moment I was panicked as he grabbed my shoulder and pulled me forward, but when the knife dipped behind me, I felt the plastic restraints being popped off. He placed the knife back into its scabbard on his left gauntlet, holding the plastic in one hand while he fished for something in a pouch on his belt. He produced my omnitool and asked "Leave this somewhere?"

I nodded, slightly embarrassed at my ruse. It had turned out to be amateurish but I couldn't have been sure.

He handed it to me and retook his seat across the bay. "You activated the trace and then hid in the adjacent field?"

Again I nodded, glancing out the corner of my eye at the rest of the marines in the bay. Most of them were nodding off but a few had taken interest and were listening intently.

The man shook his head before smiling "Good thinking, kid." He turned to one of the marines and yelled out something "Hegazi. Hegazi! Hegazi!"

The marine in question jumped in her seat, having dozed off, "Sir?"

Pointing to the rifle the man asked "Is that what I think it is?"

Hegazi held it up by the barrel "Sure is, LT. Kishock. Hegemony made."

Most of the marines still awake grumbled and muttered derogatory things about the rifle.

The man leaned forward, questions in his eyes "How did you wind up with a batarian harpoon gun?"

I swallowed as I remembered everything that occurred on the farm. Tears started to blur my vision as I blinked them away. "I killed the batarian that had it."

My reply had been soft and hoarse but apparently the rest heard it perfectly fine. Another marine whistled and addressed the man across from me. "Shit, setting traps and taking out armed pirates? We can barely get E2s to wash their ass."

The marines either chuckled or rolled their eyes. The man across from me just shook his head and reassured me "You did real good, Luis, was it?" I nodded. "I'm Lieutenant Zabaleta, UNSC Marines. We're going to take you to the tether. The pirates bugged out when we entered the system and we've secured Nouveau Basel and Konstantestar. From there you'll be taken aboard the Einstein and treated for whatever injuries you have. Got any family we need to contact?"

I closed my eyes and felt tears trickle out of the corners. I knew my mother was dead for sure, and chances were probably high my father and sister were too. I felt a stab of guilt as I hoped they were. The alternative, being taken slave, was much worse. I shrugged and answered "I don't know. My sister Lizzy is back on Earth."

He nodded solemnly and brought up his omnitool. Entering in a few commands, he scanned the results before asking me "Albert, Hannah, Elizabeth and Araceli?"

I pushed aside my anguish to clarify his question "Lizzy is at college on Earth. I saw my mom's body. I think Ari got away. I don't know about my dad."

He entered in some info and came up with smile "Your sister Araceli is already aboard the Einstein. Comms are still down for the colony but the Einstein can forward info to your sister Lizzy that you and your other sister are alive. We'll have another crew go and check out your residence in a few hours."

My stomach flipped at the news about Ari. Lieutenant Zabaleta stood up and shook my hand as the rest of the marines nodded in respect.

I waited until the dropship landed in the open space next to Marktplatz station before hopping out. Another marine near the elevator waved me over as harsh flood lights lit everything. Military vehicles and equipment were everywhere. The area had been sanitized and the bodies removed. Aside from the structural damage it was a total transformation from the horror scene earlier today.

Boarding the elevator, there was only two armed marines and myself. I sat down in the seat furthest in the corner and leaned against the wall of the carriage, my head on the cool glass as we rode the thirty minutes in silence. Mindoir was so peaceful blanketed in darkness. As we rose higher I was treated to Malawi casting a beautiful glow across the mountain tops and oceans. So deceptive to see such calm beauty across the planet knowing what happened here today.

The carriage docked with Konstantestar station and the vacuum doors opened. What lay beyond was a complete mess. If Nouveau Basel looked like nothing happened, Konstantestar was a disaster zone. Damage from firefights and explosives marred the structures and shops. A portion of the skylight ceiling was replaced with metal plates, having been shot out. The stench of smoke permeated the air, a clear sign that the air filtration and recycling system wasn't working properly. All around Marine, Air Force and Navy personnel scurried about doing random jobs. A guard near the doors greeted me. "Survivor? Follow me."

Without waiting for a reply, she marched towards the docks and I hurried to keep up. There were technicians everywhere fixing the station. We weaved through the chaos and made it to the terminals for the larger ships. My guide pointed towards a docking arm that obviously was connected to the gargantuan ship outside.

Arriving at the entrance for the docking arm I was stopped by armed guards who scanned me before waving over a medic who began scanning me yet again. He nodded to himself before asking "Low grade concussion. Lacerations to your ribs. Bruising to your abdomen. Can you walk?"

I wasn't about to fall over but I definitely wanted to sit down and possibly sleep. Nodding I answered "Yeah. Is it much farther?"

He shook his head before waving me on to follow him. "Not really,

mostly elevators. When did you last eat?"

I thought back and was shocked to realize it was this morning. It seemed like a life time ago, sitting at the table with Mom and Ari. Something we'll never do again. I felt depression creeping in again as fingers snapped in front of my face, literally snapping me out of my funk. "You there? If you're feeling dizzy or disoriented tell me. Scans are showing you're relatively fine but you can never be sure with concussions."

"Sorry. I was just remembering when I ate. It was breakfast." He nodded and made a note on his omnitool.

We walked the rest of the way across the docking arm and into the ship where we were subjected to another set of guards scanning us. From there we walked across a hall and into an elevator with several other personnel from the ship.

Ten levels ascending and we exited, making a right down a hallway. The medic informed me of our destination "You're going to be placed into sick bay three with the other non emergencies. The notes from the field unit states that your sister was already aboard and that's the same bay she's been placed in."

I perked up, eager to be reunited with my Ari. We stopped at a pressurized door that opened at our presence. The smells of a medical facility stung my nose and made me think of Mom's office at the hospital. The murmurs, sobbing and wails of the occupants was maddening but my eyes frantically searched for Ari amongst the dozens of people crammed into the room.

As if magnetically drawn I found her just as our eyes met. She was seated against the far right wall on a cot that had been set up and nibbling on a bar of food. She smiled and threw her meal down on the cot as she rushed to me. I picked her up in a bear hug, ignoring the pain as she latched her arms around my neck. We both cried freely, although if asked I'd swear it was from the pain in my ribs.

The medic had graciously stood by while we were reunited. After a few moments he cleared his throat and we separated. I dried my eyes as he gave us both a contrite smile "Sorry, but your brother has to get checked and have any injuries treated. But as soon as he is done, you two can talk."

Ari pouted but nodded before asking "Want some food? Some guy keeps coming by with a cart carrying bars and tubes of paste."

I nodded enthusiastically, willing to eat anything at this point. Well, almost anything.

"No onions." I glared at Ari before the medic nudged me along and I complied.

I was seated inside of an office and the medic went off to find a doctor. Looking around there were awards, pictures and trinkets. Just like mom's office. There was even a mug on the desk labeled 'Galaxy's Greatest Mom'.

I felt tears burn in my eyes as I valiantly tried to hold them back. But it was no use. I was too tired to fight it and, thankfully, too

tired to cry fully. I just sat there sobbing quietly.

The doctor walked in to that but seemed to pay it no mind. She was an Asian woman with a kind face and black hair pulled back in a messy bun. The uniform she wore was stained with blood and dirt but she carried herself with the utmost professionalism. "Good afternoon. I'm CMO Choi. I'm sure you want to get some food and rest so let's hurry up, shall we?"

My embarrassment at crying forgotten for the moment I looked at the doctor peculiarly. "Afternoon? It's nighttime."

The doctor froze in her setup, frowning at me. She activated her omnitool before sighing, all traces of professionalism gone as her shoulders sagged and her head drooped. She shook herself from her theatrics and smiled at me, punching in something on her omnitool. "Thank you. I completely forget to sync with local time. It's been nonstop work since we arrived."

I nodded, a bit skeptical at having a frazzled doctor performing anything on me, even applying medigel. I remembered how badly Mom could goof things up at home when she was tired or frustrated. Again thoughts of my mother brought on melancholy and tears.

The doctor, for her part, expertly ignored my sadness. She'd probably seen it all as a military doctor. And if she hadn't, today probably fixed that. She scanned, probed and prodded. She cleaned my ribs before applying medigel and bandages to cover them while the gel did it's work, accelerating the healing process. She took a blood sample and placed it in a machine before going back and reviewing her files. She looked up at me shrewdly "Hmm. I remember your sister now. Quite the mouth for such a pretty little girl. Are you aware that the both of you are biotics?"

I blanched, not sure what to say. This was the first doctor that wasn't my mother to scan me in years.

She sighed and pulled up a seat. "I know people don't have the highest opinion of biotics, but there is a reason you need to be registered. You're a threat to yourself and others until you learn how to control this." I said nothing but stared at the ground between us. Mom had done the right thing. They would have taken us to biotic boot camp. "The training academies aren't so bad. Besides, if these results are right, you nearly fried your own nervous system using your biotics today without an amp."

I looked up to see her looking at me with pursed lips and a slight glare. She shook her head and leaned back in her chair, going over my results "Toss in a concussion, no matter how weak, blood loss and I'm honestly surprised you're standing, let alone having normal brain function."

The machine pinged and she accessed the results from her omnitool. Glancing at the readout she queried me about my genetics "No past augmentations? Something added to combat illness or defects?"

I shook my head. Me and my sisters were natural. Mom was insistent that we wait until we were eighteen to even consider genetic augmentation or cybernetic implants. '_Let your body grow on it's own before you begin tampering with it_' she would say. "None that I know

of, Ma'am."

She nodded before frowning. "Your sister had the same issue as you. A flag on your genetics. Must be hereditary then." She tapped her chin, talking aloud to herself "It's not an illegal mod or a treatable condition. Maybe biotics?"

She looked up at me and smiled "Give me a moment to access the database. I'm not familiar with this flag."

As she synched her omnitool to her terminal I wondered what it was that me and Ari had. Mom had never mentioned anything wrong with our genetics. "We're not in trouble, are we?"

She shook her head "Not unless either of you is some secret genetics genius." She smiled at me in a motherly way "One of you hiding a degree in the field?"

I shook my head but silently wondered about my grandfather. His line of work was in genetics. Could he have done something?

The doctor continued to scan until she found what she was looking for. Her smile melted into a confused frown and then an annoyed scowl. She rolled her eyes and sighed, punching in new commands into her omnitool. A slight buzzing could be heard, she must have called someone.

"_This is Commander Takahashi, 6th Fleet ONI detachment. How can I help you?_" The man on the other end seemed bored.

"This is Captain Choi, CMO of the UNSC Einstein. I have two civilians here, siblings, who are showing a peculiar flagging for genetics. The flag only states to contact a unit ONI rep." If the doctor could have sounded any more annoyed she would have been breathing fire. She probably disliked red tape and games just like Mom did. Said that it always got in the way of treating people and saving lives.

"_Understood. Please send the relevant files._" Now I wasn't sure if this real person or VI. He had to know that the person he was speaking to wasn't in the greatest of moods, but his blunt and to the point response was bordering on demanding. Even with the please thrown in there.

The doctor shook her head and punched in several commands. The man on the other end responded a few seconds later. "_Alright. Everything checks out. They're fine. Thank you for bringing this to our attention, Captain. Have a nice day._"

And like that he hung up. The both of us seemed flabbergasted at his nonchalant and rude attitude. Have a nice day? Did he know what the hell happened here?

Shaking it off, the doctor shook her head and shrugged. She went to her desk and entered something on her terminal before dismissing me, saying that a nurse would find me in the bay with the relevant medication and treatments.

I walked back over to where Ari was seated. She had somehow convinced someone to place another cot down next to hers. On it was two bars of

raspberry flavored ossilber nutrient meals and a bottle of water. Smiling at my sister I picked up the first bar and bottle before sitting down to enjoy my meal.

Ari scooted close and snuggled up next to me. Normally I would have balked at her doing so, especially while eating, but I enjoyed the physical reassurance of knowing she was there.

In no time at all, I had powered through the meal and polished off the bottle. A nurse came by and collected my trash after administering more medigel and a series of antibiotics plus medications for my concussion and nerve damage. He then left me with two additional bottles of water, a tube of some terrible tasting nutrient paste labeled biotic recovery supplement and orders to finish it all before sleeping.

Complying with the demand, I set the empty tube and bottles at the foot of my cot. By now Ari had fallen asleep, curled up at my side. I stretched her out on the cot and took off her boots. Following her example, I relieved myself of my own boots before stretching out on my cot.

I stared at the metallic gray plates of the ceiling, trying to block out the noise of the ward. What were we going to do? I guess calling our grandparents or Lizzy was the only real option, but what good would that do? It's not like we could go home. I felt a lump in my throat and tears fill my eyes as I joined the many who were sobbing for loved ones lost. Within minutes and despite the stress and emotions flying through my mind or the constant hustle and bustle of the ward, sleep and complete exhaustion claimed me.

* * *

><p>Codex Entry: FabricationFRM**

Fabrication is the modern manufacturing method that drives the galactic economy. Fabrication units draw in raw materials in a semi molten or finely processed state using magnetic and mass effect fields where they are molded into desired solid parts which are then assembled to create finished products.

Industrial fabrication units are required for large or more complex pieces but compact units are sold to the public and used in many businesses to create basic items. More common are mini fabrication units attached to omnitools which are capable of creating crude and small items. This allows for individuals to create their own products without ever leaving the comfort of their dwellings.

The economy functions on schematic and blueprint designs created and copyrighted by artists, engineers, corporations and entrepreneurs which can be purchased via the extranet or specially licensed shops. The prices for these designs vary but the common contract allows for one time fabrication before the design is deleted or rendered null forcing the user to purchase the design again if they desire to fabricate another. Other formats involve licensing which allows an approved vendor or business entity to purchase the design permanently and pay for each time the design is used. Most shops, governments, and military forces use this licensing format to have open contracts allowing them to fabricate items and replacement parts when needed. There are, however, free use designs available around the extranet

for tools and items the Council deems commonplace in addition to the random designer who releases their work to the public free of charge.

The creators of these designs seek not only to protect their intellectual and proprietary rights but also to prevent technology from falling into the wrong hands. Fabrication Rights Media, or FRM, is the method by which designs are protected from illegal fabrication and tracked for uses using encryption, self sabotage and disabling methods.

Of course this is not without it's drawbacks. Fabrication allows remote colonies and starships to create what they need so long as they have credits to pay for them which is where the problems arise. Since the galactic communication network can have spotty service at the best of times, and down right abysmal in areas with little to no infrastructure, these remote colonies and starships can be out of contact with the galaxy for extended durations of time. When connections are reestablished the cumulative records for fabrication usage and other services are processed as one and deplete the credit accounts of the unfortunate. This then results in lengthy and costly lawsuits, litigation and ultimately the forced sale of assets to pay.

The allure of fabrication economics brings in the organized crime rings and smugglers of the Terminus. Breaking the FRM on a coveted piece of technology is the holy grail for hackers, who can then sell the cracked encryption to crime syndicates that have access to industrial fabrication units. From there they manufacture the pirated designs and sell the finished products for cheaper on the black market. Quality and availability are not always the best, but chances are that if enough credits exchange hands a person can get anything they want from illegal fabrication in the Terminus.

The most famous instance of unbreakable FRM comes from the Covenant, who employ an encryption, identification and countermeasure method so efficient that none have been able to reverse engineer their weaponry or equipment. Experts disagree on how these methods work as little is actually known about the Covenant outside of warfare. Some argue that it is standard military procedure to prevent anyone outside the Covenant from learning this technology, while others believe their religious fanaticism views those who do not share their beliefs as being unworthy. Whatever the case may be, functioning Covenant technology is impossible to come by unless it's being wielded by the Covenant.

* * *

><p>Codex Entry: LanguageTranslators**

Language is the method by which sapients communicate, with thousands of permutations spoken, written or signaled by individual species alone. Making it so a galactic society composed of several different species can effectively communicate is no small feat. Attempts at a galactic trade language have largely failed as unless species are forced to learn and use it they gravitate towards their own languages. The more practical solutions are bit of social engineering combined with translation VIs.

Since most species have evolved cultural standards to place a small

handful of their languages as the primary tongues spoken this makes the job easier, although personal speech patterns, dialects, slang, accents, fonts, emotional inflections, patois and cultural heritage to use idioms makes the job of translation VIs difficult. This also does not account for species that use other mechanisms to communicate such as Batarian body posture, Jiralhanae pheromone scents, Hanar bio illumination and Elcor ultrasonic pitches.

The standard omnitool mounted VI translation systems will attempt to take into account as many possibilities as it can but accurate translations are not guaranteed. This can create awkward and sometimes disastrous situations between species as their interactions run afoul of miscommunication. This happens frequently with species that are newly discovered and not yet fully understood or those that insist on using obscure language subsets of their species. Often criminal elements will purposely use these less common methods of communication to evade translation in public and avoid law enforcement.

How translation is viewed is dependent upon the user. Some prefer the method of having their omnitool or other devices speak aloud although this can seem rude in some instances. Others prefer to have visual confirmation across HUDs in eyewear or helmets. The most popular method is to have it transmitted to an earpiece or ear implant for private audio translation. Updated language packs containing the primary languages of each species are generally available to the public free of charge but unofficial languages and dialects must be purchased, leading many to forgo them. It's generally unnecessary unless one does business with many different species and wishes to not be caught unaware of how to deal with a customer, client or business partner. Military forces often assign language packs to their troops in preparation for operations. Law enforcement officers, civil servants, convenience VIs and entertainment are equipped to offer a variety of language translation services to better assist the public but discrimination against specific language subsets persists.

The galactic culture does seem to be, over time, creating language standards. Since the founding of the Galactic Council, most if not all edicts and laws have come in the primary Asari or Salarian tongues. This has forced many within Council space to adapt and learn these tongues in order to understand what the galactic government and their various departments decree. Similar effects have been seen in the financial industry as the Volus and their banking institutions control the exchange rates for credits. The Turian terms and hand signals have seen increased popularity in military applications. Hegemony influence has created the unifying theme of the primary Batarian tongues being the language of choice for large population centers in the Terminus. Human languages are gaining in popularity because of the widespread dissemination of their entertainment culture, but that is also quickly joining the Turian languages in military usage as the humans begin to share more of the burden of Council security.

Of course limitations exist as some species at times seem to be beyond civil communication. Famously the Vorchas of Heshtok, with their short lifespans, incredible adaptability, and aggressive nature, are malleable in learning many languages quickly leading some to suspect if their genetic adaptability extends to understanding patterns as well. Unfortunately, Vorchas still have a difficult time

expressing themselves and prefer to use their tried and true methods of using violence. Attempt to communicate with the Rachni during the Rachni wars were a wasted effort as the species could not be reasoned with long enough to get a clear understanding of their method of communication, although the general consensus was a combination of pheromones, verbal clicks, and some sort of hive mind telepathy.

This inability to communicate extends to the alien collective of the Covenant as well. The myriad species of the Covenant speak one unified tongue, with the Sangheili seemingly the most fluent and at ease. This leads many to theorize the language is the Sangheili primary tongue and it is still poorly understood outside of the Covenant. That is not to say that the other species do not exhibit communication patterns of their own, with the Yanme'e exhibiting a series of squeals and chattering, and the Lekgolo rumbling rhythmic ultrasonic pulses. Interestingly, the Unggoy exhibit an uncanny ability to mimic the languages of opponents although it is unclear if they understand what they are saying as they often repeat words or phrases in nonsensical ways. The most fascinating aspects of Covenant communication has been discovered during the conflict on the Human colony world of Harvest. Researchers were shocked to find that Jiralhanae spoke Sangheili fluently less than a galactic century after their annexation. This could mean the Covenant have an unseen method of educating all in language although many suspect that this change is forced upon the annexed races at threat of death or worse.

* * *

><p>Codex Entry: Terminus

Our home galaxy is a large and intricate collection of over 400 billion stars. It would take a massive and costly effort spanning multiple generations to map it in full detail beyond basic star charts, although many efforts have been made. Combined with the technological limits of mass effect and slipstream travel this makes it equally difficult to expand beyond a few light years around relays.

This has lead to a major misconception about territory controlled and claimed by governmental bodies. The public perception is that their government has explored and continues to patrol all areas associated in claimed star clusters. The truth is that areas claimed are largely unexplored and uninhabited. This disconnect between what is believed and what is factual has lead to many political, and military, debacles throughout galactic history.

None continues to influence current events more than the area of the galaxy known as the Terminus. The confluence of unexplored star systems, limits of government influence and the reliable ability of sapients to find a way to make a credit has created this wild, and perilous, frontier that covers roughly 60% of the galaxy.

The Terminus is a patchwork of unaffiliated colonies, frontier settlements, private mining operations, warlord run space stations and hideaways for the criminal elements living in the shadows of threats. With no official organized government the balance of power shifts constantly based upon credits, leadership and who won the latest conflict. Power and the willingness to use it against your

enemies and the weak is the way of life in the Terminus.

The formation of the Terminus dates back to the original Asari and Salarian Council. Exploration and expansion have always been one of the goals of the Council since it's inception, but realizing that goal was easier said than done. The history of the galaxy, and the Council races in particular, since that time has shown it's a very difficult goal to achieve.

The Rachni Wars proved that the haphazard and reckless opening of relays was a recipe for disaster. Acting more cautiously after the war the Council races managed to achieve a route to the Omega Nebula star cluster and establishing element zero mining operations at the Omega asteroid.

The Krogan world of Korlus was the site of the first recorded contact with the alien collective known as the Covenant in 872 CE. After the resounding loss the Council found it prudent to cease all exploration and expansion until the territory claimed by the Covenant could be identified and avoided.

This inability to expand, coupled with the loss of a viable garden world, forced the rapidly exploding Krogan populations to begin infighting along clan lines. The intraspecies warfare erupted into aggression against other races with the Krogan attempt to annex the Asari planet of Lusia in 1097 CE. The ensuing Krogan Rebellions would extend the moratorium on exploration and expansion until the war's official end in 1201 CE.

Under the military protection of the Turians, the Council once again attempted expansion by reopening operations on Omega and creating the Council Demilitarization Enforcement Mission to quarantine Krogan worlds. In 1389 CE the KigYar species was located in the Terminus and subsequently quarantined under the CDEM. By 1444 CE expansion was brought to a halt again with the second Covenant conflict, this time centered around the Turian controlled world of Gellix. Still unable to locate the territories of the Covenant, the Council and associate races began financially and politically withdrawing from support for Terminus expansion.

The discovery and introduction of the Batarian and Quarian species in 1543 CE and 1567 CE, respectively, spurred some growth in the the Terminus but the growing perception was that without much support from the government or business communities these efforts were doomed. Soon private militias began offering security services as the Council was reluctant to garrison military forces for fear of provoking the Covenant. This proved to be the turning point for the Terminus.

By 1694 CE, the Terminus was effectively in rebellion with many pointing towards the increasing influence of the Batarians being the primary driver. The Council sent military forces but ultimately withdrew after the 1739 CE rout on Omega station placing it in the hands of a powerful Krogan warlord.

A third Covenant conflict would arise shortly after in 1742 CE, this time centered around the annexing of the Kig Yar species. The Jiralhanae race and the Vorchia race would be discovered in the Terminus only to be quarantined by CDEM garrisons in 1853 CE and 1976 CE, respectively. The fourth Covenant conflict happened when they

annexed the Jiralhanae race in 2492 CE.

In 2185 CE the Batarian Hegemony began a galaxy wide bid for dominance. The bid failed and the Hegemony was defeated, making no obvious gains but the balance of power in the galaxy would be forever changed. The Terminus areas would become the defacto domain of the Hegemony, extending it's economic and resource wealth while creating a thriving black market based upon goods and services not available in Council Space. Furthermore, mercenary groups were able to establish themselves as major players able to provide security and private military options to those who could pay.

The final destabilizing event would come in 2295 CE with the Geth War. Surrounded and isolated by hostile forces in the Terminus, the Quarian people augmented their military and domestic forces with mechs controlled by networked VIs beginning in 1903 CE. When the VIs rebelled the Council was unable, and some say unwilling, to send a military force to aid the Quarrians for fear of exposing themselves to Covenant and Terminus hostilities. The ensuing genocide created a roaming fleet of resentful surviving Quarrians and the threat of synthetic Geth who obliterate all attempts to enter former Quarian controlled space.

Humanity's introduction to the galaxy in 2479 CE has been the source of current friction, with humans ignoring the lessons of the past. The Batarian Hegemony, which shares borders with the Human Systems Alliance, has responded aggressively to human expansion. It is only a matter of time before these neighbors, both proud and stubborn, begin a war that might have consequences for the entire galaxy.

* * *

><p>Codex Entry: Piracy

Smuggling, slavery, extortion and piracy are acts that have names in every language spoken in the galaxy. The acts seem to be commonplace no matter the species. So it was inevitable that as these species spread to the stars their bad habits would follow them.

The mass relays allow quick travel between star clusters spread out over distances that can range in the tens of thousands of light years. Conventional travel between star clusters is theoretically possible, but would be far too slow and require extensive infrastructure in the form of refueling stations, reliable discharge locations, caches capable of restocking consumables, and defense forces to protect it all. With ready access to mass relays, such expensive and complex operations are not only unnecessary but also make defending and policing star clusters somewhat predictable as the relays act as choke points.

This is where piracy fills in the gaps, literally. A thriving black market has risen to coincide with the separation of the Terminus from Council control. In order to facilitate the lucrative smuggling of controlled and banned items, the pirates and warlords of the Terminus, aided by the Batarian Hegemony, are constantly creating ad hoc pathways into Council controlled star clusters. These pathways typically originate in a nearby star cluster not under control of Council forces and weave a long and meandering path between star systems until they reach striking distance of the target clusters.

Since the number of stars systems making up a star cluster can reach in excess of a hundred it becomes near impossible for the 'owners' to defend all avenues of approach. Taking advantage of this, the pirate gangs, smuggling operations and slaver raids sneak in to conduct their business and then quickly leave before defense forces can pinpoint them or their entry point.

This creates a never ending task for defense forces to carefully search the stars near the edge of their territorial claim for any sign of regular traffic. Intelligence satellites or ambushes are set up frequently, not only to destroy but track the invaders back to the star systems that mark the entry points of the pathways. There the defense forces purge any infrastructure to deter the groups from using this pathway. But inevitably the operations are shifted to another nearby star system or set back up in their old spot once the defense forces return to their star cluster.

The Batarian Hegemony is without a doubt the largest beneficiary of piracy as they are the largest producer of illegal goods in the galaxy, largest purchaser of slaves and largest consumer of stolen technology or materials. Their economy drives the Terminus, funneling credits towards the infrastructure of these pirate pathways and until they are dealt with the piracy will continue.

Smuggling is by far the most common operation conducted by pirate forces. The Terminus and Hegemony operate outside of Council law so illegal fabrication, controlled elements, contraband, and individuals needing to get in or out of Council space are the lifeblood of smuggling. The several months it takes to complete most trips is well worth the time and effort for smuggling crews since they can make a minor fortune offloading their cargo. This creates a profession that attracts any group with access to a star ship and a willingness to take on the risk.

Actual piracy comes in a distant second as it requires greater skill and risk plus starships equipped for combat. Preying upon merchant freighters carrying cargo stopping to refuel or discharge, the pirates will threaten destruction unless compliance is met. The pirates quickly board and either steal the the ship outright or offload the cargo, killing the crew or marooning them in escape capsules. Since this type of operation requires extensive knowledge of the travel routes, cargo and habits of freighters it can be a painstaking profession. Successful pirates are patient and intelligent, willing to wait for the right prey in order to take a maximum bounty of stolen goods to return to Terminus or Hegemony space.

Extortion is the third most common type of piracy, occurring most frequently in the Terminus. Colonies, frontier settlements and mining operations are easy prey for someone with a starship mounted mass acceleration cannon and no scruples. Demanding credits, supplies and resources, these pirates are often careful to never actually harm the targets or destroy their infrastructure so that they may return again in the future. Mercenary groups make a living being hired to stop or prevent these extortions while upstart pirate groups will try to muscle in on an established extortion rings. Pirates in the Terminus often speak of going on 'Tribute Runs' where they extort their targets and then return to a major port like Omega or Tortuga to spend their riches.

The fourth and final flavor of piracy are slavers. By far the most complex and large operations, functioning around rogue mercenary groups who recruit and pay other pirates to aid them. They plan out their raids well in advance, scouting defenses and making preparations for the estimated number of slaves to be taken. Targeting small colonies or large mining operations, they begin their attacks by cutting off communications with the rest of the galaxy and then begin the onslaught with overwhelming force. They gain orbital superiority with small attack craft before descending to the surface with gunships and shuttles. They quickly overwhelm defenders and automated systems before rounding up as many civilians as quickly as possible. They are then tagged with tracking implants and boarded into waiting freighters in orbit. A typical slaver raid lasts less than twenty four hours and can get away with several thousand new slaves. From there they are sold on the black market according to their value, with the sex trade, illegal experimentation, bloodsports and manual labor being the biggest industries purchasing.

4. Bad News Travels Fast Interlude

****Author's Note:** This chapter and others like it will be used to flesh out gaps between time as well as give you more insight into things. The next chapter jumps over a year into the future to begin laying down the foundation of Shepard's family connections and his reasoning for joining the military.******

* * *

><p>ANN Newsbreak: Breaking News; Human Colony World Under Siege [May 19th, 2570 Standard Terran Calendar]

The colony world of Mindoir has reportedly been attacked by Terminus pirates. Reports are still coming in but can nothing more can yet be confirmed. The Systems Alliance and UNSC are not giving any official statements as of this moment but are urging the public to remain calm and wait until all details are known. The outer colony of Mindoir is located in the Malawi system of the Maroon Sea star cluster, on the edges of Systems Alliance space. If you have relatives living on this colony you are being directed to contact your local CAA for updates. Those of you interested in sending aid should donate to the Intergalactic Red Star. The Systems Alliance and Citadel Council wish to make it absolutely clear that while xenos were undoubtedly involved in the incident on Mindoir any hate crimes perpetrated against xenos will not be tolerated.

Update: The tragedy on the outer colony world of Mindoir continues to unfold. Earlier reports of Terminus pirates perpetrating the attack can now be confirmed by UNSC forces of the 6th Naval Heavy Fleet. This represents the twelfth such engagement with pirate forces within Systems Alliance space in 2570 but this is by far the largest. There has not been an attack on a human colony of this magnitude since the Harvest Campaign. Early estimates place the death toll for Mindoir around nine hundred. More distressing are reports that this was primarily a slave acquisition raid which could have escaped with as many as six thousand colonists. The UNSC confirms that pirate vessels were still in system when elements of the 6th Naval Heavy Fleet's Carrier Group entered. The pirates sent proof that their large freighters held colonists and used them as shields to prevent UNSC

forces from firing upon the retreating pirate group. They reached an inferior jump point and executed a slipstream jump out of the system with the colonists. The UNSC is currently performing anti piracy patrols in all Systems Alliance controlled star clusters as a precaution but experts believe that piracy groups will not be foolish enough to attack while the UNSC is on the highest alert. The Systems Alliance DCS has declined to issue a ban or warning for any interstellar travel but do urge private operations to employ greater security for freighters and mining operations.

* * *

><p>[\ Colonial Affairs [A] CAA Mindoir [to] Luis V Shepard [A] NBasel Mindoir \] [\ 2570-05-20 \]

[\ Re: Albert Shepard; Hannah Gonzalez Shepard \]

[\ As next of kin for Albert Shepard and Hannah Gonzalez Shepard we regret to inform you of their deaths. UNSC forces recovered their bodies early this morning and CAA officials were able to match them to identitag, genetic and medical records on file. We believe this is related to the unfortunate attack perpetrated by Terminus pirates yesterday, May 19th. Please contact the Mindoir CAA within seven Terran days at this address to make arrangements to retrieve the bodies of your loved ones and prepare for funerary rites of your choice. Further inquiries regarding legal status of property, tax records and inheritance should also be forwarded to this same address. We offer our condolences to you and your family in this time of mourning. \]

* * *

><p>[Private Vidchat Transcript] [\ 2570-05-20 \]

Username: LizLuvsLaw [Elizabeth Magdalena Shepard; Identitag: Luna 179977EMS2550]

LizLuvsLaw [Login] [Online] [Massachusetts, UNAS, Earth, Sol, Orior Cluster]

LizLuvsLaw: Luis?

LizLuvsLaw: Brother? Pick up!

LizLuvsLaw: [Unintelligible] Please, pick up [Unintelligible] ...Why is no one answering?!

LizLuvsLaw: Answer damn it!

Username: TheMindoirColonyKid [Luis Vincent Shepard; Identitag: Mindoir 847261LVS2554]

TheMindoirColonyKid [Login] [Online] [Konstantestar Station, Mindoir, Malawi, Maroon Sea]

TheMindoirColonyKid: I'm here.

LizLuvsLaw: Oh thank god! It's all over the news. Something happened on Mindoir but no one knows any details. What happened? Something

about pirates? Where is everyone? How come Mom and Dad are not answering?

LizLuvsLaw: Luis?

TheMindoirColonykid: They're dead.

LizLuvsLaw: The pirates?

TheMindoirColonyKid: Mom and Dad.

LizLuvsLaw: What? [Unintelligible] ...No. This isn't funny.

TheMindoirColonyKid: I'm not joking, Liz. They're dead. The CAA sent us confirmation this morning.

LizLuvsLaw: [Unintelligible]

TheMindoirColonyKid: Liz?

LizLuvsLaw: [Unintelligible] No. No. Please, no. [Unintelligible] Ari? Is she... please don't let her be.

TheMindoirColonyKid: She's fine. We're together. On Konstantestar. [Unintelligible] What are we supposed to do, Liz?

LizLuvsLaw: I... I'll contact Nana. Will you and Ari be fine?

TheMindoirColonyKid: [Unintelligible] I guess.

LizLuvsLaw: Are you hurt?

TheMindoirColonyKid: No. Nothing serious. [Unintelligible] They know we're biotics.

LizLuvsLaw: What? [Unintelligible] Damn it. Damn it! How did this happen?

TheMindoirColonyKid: When they gave us medical attention.

LizLuvsLaw: Who was the doctor? One of the ones mom worked with? Maybe Nana or Tata can talk to them?

TheMindoirColonyKid: They're not going to be able to bribe a UNSC officer, Lizzy.

LizLuvsLaw: [Unintelligible] Damn it, Luis!

TheMindoirColonyKid: It's not like I planned this!

LizLuvsLaw: [Unintelligible] I know. How did this happen? Everything on Mindoir?

TheMindoirColonyKid: They were slavers.

LizLuvsLaw: [Unintelligible] Oh god.

TheMindoirColonyKid: They took... a lot of people. [Unintelligible]
Well, if they didn't kill them.

LizLuvsLaw: How... how many? Anyone we know? [Unintelligible] Did,
uh, Lukas... is he?

TheMindoirColonyKid: I don't know.

LizLuvsLaw: I'm... I'll call Nana.

TheMindoirColonyKid: Okay

LizLuvsLaw: Tell Ari I... just stay safe. I love
you.

TheMindoirColonyKid: Love you, too. We'll be here.

LizLuvsLaw: [Offline]

TheMindoirColonyKid: [Offline]

* * *

><p>[\ Vivian S Prieto [A] Sarg Bekenstein [to] Luis V
Shepard [A] NBasel Mindoir \] [\ 2570-05-20 \]

[\ Death leaves a heartache no one can heal, love leaves a memory no
one can steal \]

[\ There are no words to convey how we all feel. Your mother was my
baby girl and her loss is painful beyond words but I understand your
pain and the pain of your sisters is far worse. To lose your parents,
at such young ages and to such senseless violence is something that
can never be explained or treated. Your grandfather and I will do
everything in our power to help all three of you with anything you
need. We are working to get custody of you and Araceli transferred to
us immediately. Your uncle Kamal is on his way to retrieve the both
of you and bring you back to Bekenstein. We'll work on handling your
parent's affairs so don't worry yourself over that. I love you and
will see you soon. Be strong for your little sister. She's going to
need it.

My heart grieves with yours, Abuela Vivian /]

* * *

><p>Extranet Records [\ 2570-06-16 \]

[Search Term] Why do bad things happen to good people?

[Search Term] Terminus

[Search Term] Terminus Pirates

[Search Term] Batarians

[Search Term] Batarian Hegemony

[Search Term] I hate Batarians

[Search Term] Mindoir

[Search Term] Depression

[Search Term] How to commit suicide

[Search Term] Bekenstein sucks

* * *

><p>[\ Colonial Registry [A] CAA Bekenstein [to] Luis V
Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein; Luis V Shepard [A] NBasel Mindoir \] [\
2570-07-22 \]

[\Official Residency On Bekenstein \]

[\ This notification is to inform you of the activation of your
permanent Bekenstein mail address and the deactivation of your
permanent Mindoir mail address. The Mindoir address will be closed
within twenty four Terran hours of receipt of this message. Our
records show your permanent emigration from Mindoir to Bekenstein has
been approved with legal guardianship under Hector Gonzalez and
Vivian Prieto. Mordehai Polytechnic Preparatory Academy has accepted
your registration for their upcoming academic year. If you have any
questions or complaints please forward them to the Bekenstein CAA.
\]

* * *

><p>[\ Biotic Registry [A] MTrans SysAl Arcturus [to] Luis V
Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein \] [\ 2570-09-11 \]

[\Urgent: Biotic Registration Material \]

[\ The Ministry of Transhuman Studies has registered your status as a
biotic and notified the Bekenstein CAA and pertinent law enforcement
agencies. We have also registered your scheduled implantation of an
Aldrin Labs Solaris third generation bio amp suite. Waivers for
mandatory attendance to a biotic training academy have been filed
with the Ministry of Transhuman Studies and will be upheld pending
verification of alternative training from an accredited tutor. You
have six Terran weeks to file the appropriate forms for verification.
We ask that you hold the highest level of regard for the safety of
yourself and those around you. Biotics are an incredible gift but
require even greater responsibility.

Ministry of Transhuman Studies, Biotics Research and Regulation
Department \]

* * *

><p>Extranet Records [\ 2570-09-13 \]

[Search Term] Biotics

[Search Term] Bio Amps

[Search Term] Do biotics hurt?

[Search Term] Do biotics hurt the user?

[Search Term] Implants that affect the nervous system

[Search Term] Implants that affect the Human nervous system

[Search Term] Why are sisters so annoying?

* * *

><p>[\ Kalika Malegos [A] Tayseri Citadel [to] Luis V Shepard
[A] Sarg Bekenstein; Araceli L Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein \] [\ 2570-09-19 \]

[\ Biotic Enrichment \]

[\ Greetings, human. I am your potential instructor in the art of biotic control. I do not tolerate foolishness. Biotic mastery requires patience and understanding of your body and mind or our efforts are wasted. I require that you and your sibling read the treatise on the subject by Matriarch T'Filo before our first day of instruction which will commence in five of your Terran days from my composing this missive. If I find you and your sibling competent and eager to learn then I will accept the request to teach you both.

Matron Kalika Malegos, Recipient of Athame's Chosen Award, Twenty Time Galactic Pankra Champion \]

* * *

><p>Extranet Records [\ 2570-09-20 \]

[Purchase] Vidbook: Outer Power, Inner Calm by Matriarch T'Filo

[Search Term] Translation packages for ancient Asari Serrice dialects

[Purchase] Language Pack: Historical Thessian Dialects

[Search Term] Mnemonic

[Search Term] Biotics and Sex

[Purchase] Simulstim: Dirty Daughters of Demeter #42

* * *

><p>[\ Kamal F Javadi [A] ONI UNSC Citadel [to] Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein \] [\ 2570-10-14 \]

[\ Further Inquiries \]

[\ The following message has been cleared as nonessential and stored in ONI databases

Nephew, I know we discussed this matter in detail during the trip from Mindoir to Bekenstein but I need you to review some holos and vids of several individuals to identify Sprague's accomplices and possibly some of the pirates themselves. I've enclosed the files in

an attachment. Take your time and give it some thought. There is no rush.

Captain Kamal Javadi, UNSC Air Force, Office of Naval Intelligence
\\

**[\\ Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein [to] Kamal F Javadi [A] ONI
UNSC Citadel \\] [\\ 2570-10-17 \\]**

[\\Re: Further Inquiries \\]

[\\ None of those pictures of humans matched the the people we saw. All I know is that she was Asian and named something like soo hah ee luh. The other man was Latino and named Ramirez. They all wore black armor with a beige and gold diamond over the left side of their chest. Sprague was trying to contact someone named Tim, I think.

But the Batarian I know. The fourth holo. Can't mistake it. He tried to kill me. I shot him with a Kishock twice and beat him with the rifle. He was one of the bastards that killed my parents. Are you positive they never found his body?

Sorry that I can't be much more help, tio. I hope the info about the batarian helps track him and the rest down before they hurt anyone else. \\]

[\\ Kamal F Javadi [A] ONI UNSC Citadel [to] Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein \\] [\\ 2570-10-18 \\]

[\\Re: Further Inquiries \\]

[\\ The following message has been cleared as nonessential and stored in ONI databases

You have nothing to be sorry for, nephew. You've been a bigger help than you know. If your identification of that Batarian is accurate then you managed to avoid a great threat. His name is Ka'hairal Balak and he's SIU. We do not know his status but only one batarian was found dead on your property. The UNSC and Council forces have been trying to pin a solid link between the Hegemony and Terminus Pirate forces and this might be it. We'll look into the details surrounding Sprague and his accomplices. Give my regards to your sisters and best of luck with your studies. I look forward seeing you again at the next family gathering.

Captain Kamal Javadi, UNSC Air Force, Office of Naval Intelligence
\\]

* * *

><p>Extranet Records [\\ 2570-10-18 \\]

[Search Term] Ka'hairal Balak

[Search Term] SIU

[Search Term] Terminus Pirates

[Search Term] I really hate batarians

* * *

><p>[Private Vidchat Transcript] [\ 2571-03-22
\]

**Username: TheMindoirColonyKid [Luis Vincent Shepard; Identitag:
Mindoir 847261LVS2554]**

**TheMindoirColonyKid [Login] [Online] [Sargasso, Bekenstein,
Boltzmann, Serpent Nebula]**

**Username: LizLuvsLaw [Elizabeth Magdalena Shepard; Identitag: Luna
179977EMS2550]**

**LizLuvsLaw [Login] [Online] [Quintana Roo, UNAS, Earth, Sol, Orior
Cluster]**

LizLuvsLaw: So what's up?

LizLuvsLaw: Wait. Why have you not changed your chat
name?

TheMindoirColonyKid: Hi to you too.

LizLuvsLaw: [Unintelligible] Sorry. Exams fried my
brain.

TheMindoirColonyKid: I bet. So allow me to pose a hypothetical to
you. If I were to say that somehow Abuela learned you lied about
staying on campus over your break to catch up on studying would you
believe me that Ari did it?

LizLuvsLaw: You're dead. Deader than dead.

TheMindoirColonyKid: I'll take that as a no. So by exams you really
mean some Earth beach is frying your brains?

LizLuvsLaw: [Unintelligible] I hate you!

TheMindoirColonyKid: Sorry, but it was either you or me, and it
wasn't going to be me.

LizLuvsLaw: You couldn't lie for me?

TheMindoirColonyKid: To her? Hell no. She can always
tell.

LizLuvsLaw: How are we even related?

TheMindoirColonyKid: We're not. You were adopted,
remember?

LizLuvsLaw: No, I took all the brains and good looks. You got what
was left over.

TheMindoirColonyKid: So what does that make Ari?

LizLuvsLaw: She makes up for it by being exceedingly
annoying.

TheMindoirColonyKid: True. She's raiding your closet for clothes again.

LizLuvsLaw: And no one stops her?

TheMindoirColonyKid: Abuela thinks she's trying to be like you.

LizLuvsLaw: Abuela is trying to find the positive side of Ari being a thief. Look, I have to go. Take care because I want you to be in perfect health when I kill you later on.

TheMindoirColonyKid: You too. Expect Abuela to be calling you soon to ask how your studies are going. Love you Liz.

****TheMindoirColonyKid: [Offline]****

LizLuvsLaw: Asshole.

****LizLuvsLaw: [Offline]****

* * *

><p>[\ Kalika Malegos [A] Tayseri Citadel [to] Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein; Araceli L Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein \] [\ 2571-04-03 \]

[\ Sound of mind. Sound of body. One with the energy of the cosmos. \]

[\ As your formal education will be on hiatus we will use this free time in your schedule to incorporate a physical regimen to your training. I will instruct you on the exercises and routines during our next training session and you will then be expected to practice these routines between sessions. I know you will not disappoint me. Prepare yourselves. This will not be pleasant.

Matron Kalika Malegos, Recipient of Athame's Chosen Award, Twenty Time Galactic Pankra Champion \]

* * *

><p>[\ Recruitment [A] TFirma XGua Shanxi [to] Luis V Shepard \] [\ 2571-04-11 \]

[\ Happy Birthday, fellow homo sapien! \]

[\ We at Terra Firma want to wish you a very happy seventeenth birthday and ask if you're interested in joining the party that fights for humanity. Our culture and way of life is constantly being bombarded with pressure by xenos and sympathizers to assimilate into the galactic community. We at Terra Firma believe that humanity should not have to give up that which makes us human in order to do business with other species. If you feel the same way then reply to this message so we can send you literature and vids on how to spot the deceptions of tolerance and acceptance as well as direct towards local chapters of Terra Firma on your colony or settlement. When you find you're not alone and amongst like minded people you'll understand the true might of a unified and proud human race.

Keep humanity for humans! \]

* * *

><p>[Private Vidchat Transcript] [\ 2571-08-30
\]

**Username: BioticBaroness [Araceli Lindsay Shepard; Identitag:
Mindoir 397930ALS2558]**

**BioticBaroness [Login] [Online] [Sargasso, Bekenstein, Boltzmann,
Serpent Nebula]**

**Username: BekensteinsMonster [Luis Vincent Shepard; Identitag:
Mindoir 847261LVS2554]**

**BekensteinsMonster [Login] [Online] [Sargasso, Bekenstein,
Boltzmann, Serpent Nebula]**

BioticBaroness: Where are you?

BekensteinsMonster: In one of the conservatories.
Why?

BioticBaroness: I'm on my way. If anyone asks I've been out there
with you all day.

BekensteinsMonster: What? Why?

BioticBaroness: The less you know the less you can
tell.

BekensteinsMonster: I'm not getting in trouble for
you.

BioticBaroness: But I'm your favorite sister!

BekensteinsMonster: By default. Now what did you do?

BioticBaroness: I might have had an accident with my
biotics.

BekensteinsMonster: You were practicing inside the
house?!

BioticBaroness: Well technically I wasn't practicing. I was trying to
see if I could affect the cleaning drone's flight
path.

BekensteinsMonster: What did you do?!

BioticBaroness: I did nothing. The stupid drone is the one that lost
control and flew into Tata's aquarium.

BekensteinsMonster: Nope. Nuh Uh. Not going through that again. He
yelled at me for like two hours straight about responsibility and
respecting others after I accidentally killed his Heshtok
Lionfish.

BioticBaroness: Please! I'm trying to go to Tasha's birthday party

this weekend. I can't be grounded.

BekensteinsMonster: Well first of all I could care less if you attend Natasha's birthday party or not. And secondly, I thought you and Natasha weren't talking to each other anymore?

BioticBaroness: I don't need to talk to her. I just have to bring a gift and smile so I can talk to her brother Sergei.

BekensteinsMonster: Still not seeing why I should care.

BioticBaroness: This is why you don't get invited anywhere.

BekensteinsMonster: To the parties of all the spoiled brats in Sargasso? Still not caring.

BioticBaroness: [Unintelligible] You're really going to make me bribe my own brother?

BekensteinsMonster: What are you offering?

BioticBaroness: I can talk to Norina Sapir and see if she'll go on a date with you?

BekensteinsMonster: Which one is that?

BioticBaroness: Cadence Culpepper's cousin? The redhead.

BekensteinsMonster: Nope. I've talked to her before and that's why I made an effort to forget who she was.

BioticBaroness: So you're willing to go your entire time on Bekenstein without ever getting a date?

BekensteinsMonster: My choices are limited. Do I go for the stuck up princess, the stuck up heiress, or the stuck up socialite?

BioticBaroness: Whatever. I'll funnel some of the credits I get for allowance to you. Now which conservatory so we can get our stories straight?

BekensteinsMonster: The jungle one.

BioticBaroness: On my way.

****BioticBaroness [Offline]****

****BekensteinsMonster: [Offline]****

* * *

><p>[\ Admin [A] MPPA Bekenstein [to] Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein \] [\ 2571-09-08 \]

[\ Mordehai Polytechnic Preparatory Academy Senior Class \]

[\ Welcome to your final year at Mordehai Academy, class of 2572! We have a full schedule of fun and exciting activities to help make your final year here memorable before you head out into the galaxy to show everyone what Bekenstein is made of!

Want to attend higher education on Earth, Thessia, or Sur'Kesh? Be sure to attending our monthly classes on acing the college application process so you can understand the steps necessary to get into the university of your choice.

Sign up for the Mordehai athletic teams by selecting the sports link below and be sure to include your latest medical and genetic data for the eligibility screening. Since last year's unfortunate incident involving several members of the Mordehai track and field team testing positive for illegal genetic augmentation the student athletes of all programs will be screened regularly this academic year.

Social and academic clubs will be holding enrollment the first week of class but you can get a head start on browsing by selecting the sponsored extracurricular link below. The first social event will be the Annual Sargasso Ball held in La Garza at the Botanical Gardens. Students receive a discount for tickets and are encouraged to attend and socialize with members of the community.

Here's to your continued enrichment and success at Mordehai Academy!
/]

5. Family Is Important

****AN: Standard disclaimer. This fic is massively AU and will combine elements from Halo and Mass Effect into one continuity. No separate galaxies. No parallel universe travelers. I have tweaked aspects to fit them together and taken plenty of creative license.****

****I want to apologize for the lengthy delay. I had a number of plot lines that I needed to hammer out details on so I could begin inserting them into this and the following chapters. Some of you might notice symbolism and hints.****

****Also as a final note, the Codex Entries at the end of each chapter are meant to inform you, the reader, on details pertaining to the galaxy I have created. It is meant to give you insight on how I have changed or added things, but more importantly, these entries are written from the perspective of the Council and allied governments. They are part of a galactic knowledge database that technically anyone could access. Provided as a public service, they serve to inform and educate, but it should be made abundantly clear that the information within is highly edited by the Council, their various ministries, and allied governments. Expect topics to be slanted towards protecting state secrets and incomplete as some information is not known or inaccurate as of the date. When new information comes to light during the course of the fic, some entries will be repeated with updated information.****

****This is my way of keeping you readers in the dark about some of the twists and turns I am taking with melding this galaxy together. I apologize beforehand if I do not answer questions about the Covenant,**

Reapers, Flood, Protheans, or Forerunners. To do so would give away my plot.**

* * *

><p>Sargasso, Bekenstein, Boltzmann System, Serpent Nebula; September 28th, 2571 [Standardized Terran Calendar], 1958 [Local Time, Terran Standard]

My lungs were close to bursting as I ran through the trees and fields of corn on our property. I had no clue what I was running from but I knew I couldn't stop. I came to a clearing and entered the marketplace from Nouveau Basel. Overturned stalls and smashed produce littered the area but my mother sat serenely on a bench in the distance. She stared at me with sad eyes and a watery smile. "You shouldn't be here, mijo."

I awoke with a jolt as a hand touched my shoulder. It was nearly pitch dark outside, or, rather inside. The sweet smells of flowering plants and ripe fruits tinged the air as small glowing microdrones fluttered about like the insects they were designed to emulate.

In the low light I could barely make out the silhouette of my grandmother, my Abuela, standing to my right, smiling down at me patiently. "You're still having the nightmares, aren't you?"

Shrugging my response I gazed back into the dark foliage. This was one of the enclosed conservatories my grandparents kept on their property. This one represented the jungles along the Essequibo River where they honeymooned after their wedding over sixty years ago. Looking upward I gazed through the intricate lattice that held the glass ceiling aloft at Tyche, Bekenstein's moon.

Rubbing the back of my neck I naturally began fingering the edges of the implant at the base. It was round and smooth, with a square locked port, under which resided my bioamp. Curious that such a small thing could make a huge difference.

It had been a 'gift' for myself and Ari from our grandparents when we first came to live with them over a year ago. Since there was no way to hide the fact we were biotics, we had to register and be amped. My Abuela, Vivian, managed to pull some strings through contacts she had from her business dealings and had the both of us installed with the latest versions, L3's, instead of the surplus L2's that were still being pushed on the market despite the drawbacks associated with them. We also received a waiver, allowing us to be trained at home with a tutor as opposed to being sent to some academy.

Matron Malegos was a tough but fair asari. She had spent the majority of her life as an asari commandos but now resided on Bekenstein and taught others on how to use their biotics. If she held any resentment of having to arrive to travel to Sargasso to teach two human children every Saturday, she didn't show it. In fact, she had taken a real liking to Ari, often remarking she would make a wonderful commando were she an asari. The best I could ever hope for was a nod and mumbled 'acceptable'.

Glancing back at my grandmother I took in her features. It was easy to see where my mother, and my sisters, had received so much of their

beauty from. Vivian Prieto was tall and statuesque, with youthful and attractive features, green eyes and auburn colored hair streaked with gray here and there, giving her a distinguished and scholarly appearance. My grandmother was a stunning woman pushing a century but barely looked a day past her prime.

It was also easy to see where my mother had formed her opinions on dressing, as I had yet to see my grandmother in anything less than a put together, fashionable ensemble. Even at breakfast, when I stumbled downstairs at the crack of dawn still in what I slept in, Abuela was in slacks and a dress shirt, freshly showered, drinking tea and reading a datapad at the small table in the kitchen.

She was lost in her own thoughts as she absentmindedly smiled at the surrounding artificial jungle. When she noticed my curious stare her smile became more pronounced and joyful. "Just remembering pleasant memories. Your grandfather and I had such a wonderful time here during our honeymoon that we couldn't help recreating a little slice of it here." Her smile turned more calculating as she continued "We certainly take every chance we can to come out here and relive what happened on that vacation in explicit detail."

I paled as I contemplated just how many times they had used the very bench I had slept on for their relived experiences. Recoiling from the thought I stood and began marching for the small dirt path that lead to the door for the conservatory, my Abuela casually on my heels as her musical laughter pursued me even quicker. "I thought that might get you moving."

Activating the controls, I grumbled as I walked along the manicured path that lead through the gardens and fields of grass to the back of the main building. The cool and salty night breeze coming off the ocean did nothing to quell my sour mood. If there was one down side, at least to an easily mortified teenager, of the increased vitality and health of the human race as we aged, it was the fact that your parents and grandparents could lead very active lives. Well there goes any peace and tranquility I might ever find in that place ever again.

* * *

><p>Sargasso, Bekenstein, Boltzmann System, Serpent Nebula; September 29th, 2571 [Standardized Terran Calendar], 0620 [Local Time, Terran Standard]

"Damn it."

"Again."

I gritted my teeth to stave off the yell of frustration that wanted to burst forth from my lungs. Today's typical Sunday training session with the Matron was proving yet again to be a lesson in how to manage disappointment as my attempts at creating a biotic effect fizzled.

Glancing to my left and I saw the Matron, thin and lean with the rigid upright posture that embodied her centuries of martial prowess, standing behind my sister Ari. She observed my sister's movements critically, cataloging every flinch or twitch as she thrust her right palm out in a mnemonic gesture to summon a corona of dark purple

energy. The small wooden targets in the distance was enveloped in a small bubble of similar energy for a moment, the air charged with a slight hum of static electricity. The target shuddered and rocked back, hit by an unseen hand within the indigo cocoon surrounding it.

It was a pretty pathetic attempt, but it was light years beyond what I could do at the moment. At least my sister was managing to summon a warp field. I'd yet to do more than create a blip of dark energy around myself. For all the success I had on Mindoir using my fledgling gifts to defend myself I had yet to replicate anything like that since I had the bioamp installed. That was beginning to grate on me. I felt like a fraud. Like I had wasted my grandparent's credits.

Taking another glance at Ari and seeing her sweaty face beaming with pride at her accomplishments made me feel that much more smaller. She didn't have a single problem adapting. Since our tutoring had began she had excelled and I would be lying to myself if I couldn't admit that made me feel jealous. Insecure. Depressed.

"Again."

Matron Malegos barked her order in that clipped way she pronounced human words around her thick Asari accent. I didn't need to look to know that the way it was directed at me was associated with the hairs on the back of my neck standing on edge.

Taking a breath to calm my mind and then clear it, I let my body operate on memory. The mnemonic motion of thrusting my right palm out brought on the tingle throughout my body. The sensation that felt like an amplified version of pins and needles only more... strange. A jolt of power rolled through my body and focused on my extended arm. I could feel the cool embrace of dark energy surround me and I opened my eyes. Sighting the target in my field of vision, I willed the dark energy to manifest around it. To envelop it and alternate in rapidly changing fields until the target was destroyed.

Except none of that happened. Nothing. Nada. Zip. Zilch.

My mind lost it's focus as I wondered what had gone wrong. The dark energy around me receded, taking the sensation with it and leaving behind a feeling of being short of breath and light headed.

Wallowing in the negativity of the moment I lost myself to self pity and rage. I couldn't do this. It was fucking impossible.

Feeling particularly eager to have my pessimism reinforced I glanced yet again at my sister. Her progress was still awe, and jealousy, inspiring as she made her target sway slightly. I watched as it practically taunted me with the it's movements, bouncing from one leg to the other in an attempt to right itself or give into the power of my sister's warp and topple over.

The Matron walked swiftly to my side and came to a halt. I didn't look her way, unwilling to start the lecture I knew was soon to come.

"You lack focus. If one is to master the gift of the goddess than one

must master their own mind."

I maintained my feigned indifference by glaring off into the distance. The morning was still cool enough to be comfortable, but it was rapidly warming up to be another scorcher on Bekenstein. Boltzmann was now a burning orb seemingly rising from the Teves Sea.

When I didn't reply she stood in front of me, hands behind her back in an almost casual manner that was ruined by the steel in her voice and the narrowing of her eyes. Not for the first time I was taken aback at how alien yet familiar asari facial expressions were. "The mind is the essence of your being. Your body the vessel and the tool. When you were born all you could master was drawing and expelling gas into your lungs while your heart beat steadily to pump your lifeblood." She turned her head to address Ari in her monologue, "All you have learned since then has come through imitation, self discovery, and tutelage."

She took several long and graceful steps towards the targets in the distance, her feet gliding across the bright green manicured lawn of my grandparent's estate. In one swift movement she pivoted and faced us both, her body in a crouch like a wild animal ready to pounce. She held this squatting position as she continued, "The words I speak in your tongue, must be translated from my thoughts, which I have used to convey myself in my native tongue for centuries. All this I have learned to do. From my first word as a child to being able to speak to you without a translation. The simple athletic movements I have just performed. All learned through years of practice and even more in experience. From the first step I took as a child to being able to perform this." She lowered herself gracefully from the squat into a seated asari meditative position.

This time she focused her eyes on me as she spoke her next words. "It was learned and perfected through effort and determination. What you see is the end result and think it easy. You did not see my journey nor see my struggles."

Rising effortlessly to her feet she stalked back in my direction, her lecture continuing as she gestured to my own legs "Did you not accomplish the daunting and difficult task of learning to stand and walk as a child? What do you think would have happened if your fears convinced you it was beyond your grasp to do so? That it was impossible? Do you think that the fear of injury, or failure, or embarrassment should hinder your progress?"

The frustration from earlier doubled down, this time gleefully pouncing on the shame and guilt it helped create. I looked down at my feet and shook my head, "No, Matron."

"Then this task is no different. It is daunting. It is difficult. Do not let doubt color your perception of future success. That you can not do it now is a given. It is why you wish to learn. To accomplish. Like all other things you have done, it will take time, effort and determination. It is a path that will be blazed by imitation, self discovery and tutelage. You need only walk it to begin your journey."

She stepped aside and gestured to the target in the distance, her voice assuming the commanding tone again. "Now extend the willpower

within your mind. Exert the control and dominion of your body with that willpower. Tap into the unseen and draw forth dark energy with the gift of the goddess. Shape it. Mold it. Do not envision failure. Envision success."

Clearing my mind yet again, I drew on the faint memory of successfully using my biotics. What it felt like. Once I had it I thrust my right palm forward and felt the surge of dark energy surround me again. Wasting no time I took that feeling of pins and needles and mentally focused on using it to hit the target with everything I had.

The jolt left my body a split second after I opened my eyes to lock on with the target. The warp field surrounded it and lasted long enough to create an appreciable swaying.

It was nothing like Ari could do, but it was better than anything I had done yet.

Feeling proud I glanced at the Matron but her expression was one of boredom. "Better. Again."

The burgeoning smile on my face melted as I grumbled under my breath and blew out a breath to shake off the light headed feeling.

After another half hour of attempts my skill had yet to improve much but the rising sun had drastically warmed the air bringing this week's training session to a close. We helped the Matron gather her belongings and tiredly walked back towards the house.

The Matron looked about the finely manicured field dotted with large domes, the cliff edge dropping into the Teves Sea not far away. Her gaze was almost wistful, enjoying the beauty of the upper latitudes on Bekenstein.

"Thinking about going swimming, Matron?"

She turned her gaze on my sister to answer the slightly teasing question, a fond look in her eyes and a wry grin on her face. "Not quite, young one. Many centuries traveling the between the stars has sharpened my appreciation for the many worlds the goddess has given the galaxy where we might call home." Looking back at the sea she marveled, "Her work is immaculate. We only draw forth it's beauty and majesty with our efforts."

Ari wiped the sweat from her brow and frowned, a hand going to her stomach. "If I try to draw forth anything else today it's not going to be pretty."

On cue her stomach rumbled and gurgled.

I took a nervous step away from her, my own exhaustion taking a back seat to my fear she might pass gas. Eyeing her critically I frowned and shook my head, "You probably shouldn't have had that fourth serving last night."

The Matron raised an eyebrow but kept her composure, observing our interactions with her usual cool and detached manner. Although I did noticed she seemed to be tensed to move away from Ari should the worst come to pass.

My sister shrugged, neither agreeing or disagreeing with my conclusion, but placed both hands over her tender abdomen nonetheless.

As we neared the house we saw two people sitting on the veranda along the rear portion of the house. Probably enjoying the cooler conditions of morning before the heat of the day set in and forced us to remain indoors. Squinting to see who it was I suppressed a groan once I had my answer.

Nana Vivian stood to greet us, a trio of water containers at the ready. Bisabuela Elvira, her mother, my great grandmother, wasn't as courteous. "It's far too early for all this blue and purple."

Matron Malegos didn't flinch but her gaze locked with the elderly human woman, who wasn't the type to back down. After a tense moment of their staring contest the Matron turned to Abuela Vivian, accepting the offered container of water from her hostess, "Mistress Prieto. A pleasure, as always."

"Will you be staying for a quick meal? It's no problem. We're feeding a small herd here anyways. One more wouldn't matter." Abuela was using every trick in her repertoire to avoid the awkward situation brewing, breaking out the big guns of her charm, smile and hospitality. If I could be removed from the situation I might even find it amusing, but given the circumstances I was nervously watching the three interact and hope it didn't come to blows over my great grandmother's prejudices.

Looking between daughter and mother, the Matron shook her head slowly and took a large drink from her water container. "As tempting as the offer might be I must decline. I have business to attend to back in Milgrom and the sooner I leave the better."

"Don't be so blue about it. Just go." Bisabuela Elvira snidely remarked from her seat, not even bothering to look the Matron's way as she raised a teacup to her lips.

Abuela Vivian's shoulders sagged and I could swear she looked like she was repressing the urge to hold her head in her hands. It would seem that whatever powers that run the universe took pity on her by delivering a distraction in the form of Ari's stomach rumbling especially loud.

Ari blushed and grimaced in pain, quickly walking past everyone and into the house, blurting out over her shoulder, "Thanks for the training. I gotta go. Bye."

With the tension successfully broken the Matron placed her now empty container back on the small table and bid her own farewell, "My thanks for your kindness, Mistress Prieto. Until next week."

With that she left, walking through the house and towards the staircase that lead to the underground parking garage where her skycar awaited.

My Abuela turned to her mother and glared, her courteous tone long gone and replaced in a harsh whisper, "Could you be anymore rude, mother?"

Bisabuela Elvira shrugged and tossed her long silvery tresses over her shoulder, casually blowing the steam away from her tea. "Possibly. It's prudent to let a blue hussy know where she stands in your presence." She peered over the rim of her teacup at her daughter, "I'm more concerned you let her walk about your home freely. Haven't you learned anything?"

Abuela Vivian sighed and sat down, throwing her mother a disgruntled and exasperated sigh. "This is my home and she is welcome in it. Like all other guests." She placed a special emphasis on the word guest, giving Bisabuela Elvira a meaningful glance.

But if she noticed, much less cared, it didn't show. Bisabuela Elvira placed her teacup down and stared at her daughter, talking to her like she was a child. "That's how it starts. You show them respect and they walk right over you. Before you know it they're spreading their azure for anyone and everyone in your life."

I frowned at the comment azure, not quite sure what it meant but given the way she said it, and the way it was inferred, I could take a guess. Bisabuela harbored no small amount of hatred for the people of Thessia after her marriage to my great grandfather, Sebastian, had ended after she found out he had an Asari mistress on the side.

Noticing me still standing there she turned and continued her ranting, "And don't you let this woman fill your head with this nonsense. Biotics are not a gift. It's a curse. It makes you behave like them and that's nothing to be proud of."

Biting my tongue I glowered in silence as her bigotry spewed forth. Another unfortunate event in our family history was when my great aunt, Bisabuela's sister, Leonila, and her wife Kishori, were killed when human biotic extremists took a transport hostage during the Second Insurrection War. It happened decades before I, or either of my sisters, were born, but the malice, the animus, that she felt about biotics was a pretty stark reminder of why my mother had done her best to hide our condition from everyone.

Glancing towards my grandmother I could see her sympathetic expression. She'd been dealing with this woman for her entire life and knew that once she started it was best to just let her get it out of her system. Still she looked back at her mother and scowled, shaking her head. "We don't use vulgar language like that in my home, mother. And your own great grandchildren are biotics. That should be enough to show you they're not all monsters."

I cringed at her last comment. The implied insult that the majority of biotics were monsters by definition. I knew she meant nothing by it, but small phrases like that definitely were louder than anything to my ears. Knowing what people thought about me just because I was biotic was insightful. And chilling.

Bisabuela Elvira stood and looked at me earnestly, taking my hands before I could flinch away. "You poor babies. First you were cursed with this and then your parents being killed." She squeezed my hands gently and made me feel super uncomfortable between the topics she was broaching and her method of showing compassion. But if I thought she had done her worst then I was about to be sorely disappointed,

"Promise me you will never bring one of those blue hussies home. Promise. Sleep with as many as you have to get it out of your system but please do not dishonor this family by bringing one home."

Shrinking back in fear and confusion I dumbly nodded. Looking at Abuela Vivian I saw she had finally given up all pretenses of being stoic in the face of her mother's tantrum. Her face was buried in the palms of her hands as she leaned into the table.

Seemingly satisfied with my answer she patted my left arm and returned to her seat.

Bewildered at the entire chain of events I followed my sister's strategy and mumbled a quick 'Bye' and excused myself. Once inside the house and breathing in the climate controlled cool air I shook my head and tried to replay just what the hell happened. Finding nothing logical other than the normally deranged and unstable behavior of my family, I began musing to myself just how amusing it might be to bring an asari girlfriend home. Just for the sheer entertainment value.

* * *

><p>Sargasso, Bekenstein, Boltzmann System, Serpent Nebula; September 29th, 2571 [Standardized Terran Calendar], 0907 [Local Time, Terran Standard]

My fingers deftly moved as they secured the collar of my dress shirt. Reaching for my light coat, I shrugged it on and examined myself in the mirror. Technically, I guess I looked great. Everything perfect and in place. But throwing it all off was the cross nature of my features. I tried relaxing my face but of it's own accord it would revert back to scowling and glaring at my own reflection.

It was no secret I hated dressing up. Absolutely loathed it. Not only was it stuffy and foreign feeling, but I associated it with the worst of events. Social gatherings. In this particular case, a family gathering. Cousins, uncles, my aunt, close family friends, current significant others. It was one big act of theater we put on for ourselves. Abuela Vivian insisted on the family converging at the estate here on Bekenstein at least a handful of times a year. One of the most recent times had been for my parent's funerals.

Almost as far back as I could remember, we would make the trip from Mindoir to come stay here so we join in on the festivities. Get all dressed up and then engage in a passive aggressive contest of seeing who was doing the more important and impressive things with their lives. It was bad enough just listening in on it or having to endure conversations like this morning, but I was getting to the age where I was expected to join in and lay out my plans for galactic domination. I didn't even know what I was going to do next week, let alone what university I wanted to go to next year or what I was going to major in. And I knew that eventually that would lead to discussions about dating, which Ari would gleefully enjoy once Bisabuela began mentioning asari again. Put that all together and you had the recipe for a wonderful day. Wouldn't miss it for all the credits in the galaxy.

A knock on my door brought me out of my sullen thoughts. Sighing, I

took one last glance at my own reflection and suppressing the urge to rip it all off before striding towards the door and activating the holo display. Seeing my older sister in the hallway, looking just as grumpy as I felt, I opened the door and greeted her with an expressionless and monotone "What?"

Lizzy looked less than amused but beautiful as always. Her dark hair was braided and piled up on top of her head in an elegant knot, showcasing a set of emerald earrings that our grandparents had given her for Christmas last year. Her hazel eyes were framed with a green shade of eyeshadow, which blended well with her naturally tan colored skin. Peach gloss covered her lips, which were currently puckered into a contemplative pout as she examined me. Around her neck was an old necklace made of pearls and seraphinite linked with small ornate platinum chains that had once belonged to my mother. She wore a form fitting long sleeved green dress of a more modern cut that accentuated the curves of her body and ended just above her knees. Currents of light shimmered throughout the fabric of the dress, moving in a hypnotic pattern that suggested leaves on a tree swaying in a gentle breeze. The ensemble ended with her long, toned legs capped with leather heeled sandals with the straps dyed green. If she was going for the look of some beautiful but vengeful goddess of vegetation, she nailed it.

"Do you normally answer your door that way?" She certainly wasting wasting time.

I felt my hackles rising at her presumptuous need to correct me on everything I did. "When it's you? Sure."

She ignored the jab, but narrowed her eyes and marched into my room. "And exactly how did you know it was me? If I find out you're talking to our grandparents or anyone else that way I will kick your ass myself."

I bit back any retort I had, blowing a ragged breath out through my nose. Composing myself, I turned to answer her question. "Abuelo knocks harder, Abuela knocks in rhythms, Ari doesn't bother to knock, and no one else would bother to come to my room. So it had to be you. Happy?"

Silent but nonetheless displeased, she glowered for a moment before sweeping her eyes over my outfit. Begrudgingly nodding her approval, she reached for my collar and tweaked it with a critical eye. Smoothing out the shoulders of my coat she sighed and shrugged, probably figuring my appearance was as good as it could get. "No. Finish getting dressed and come downstairs."

I rolled my eyes and followed her to my door but Lizzy paused in the doorway and voiced a question "And where is our dear little sister?"

I smirked to myself and shrugged. I had no clue, but if there was one thing I knew, it was that Ari hated these functions more than I did. Plus she was probably still in a foul mood over whatever was ailing her earlier.

Lizzy let loose a roar of frustration and stomped off in the general direction of the staircase, no doubt in search of Araceli. Holding my chuckles in until I had closed my door, I let them rip once I was

alone. If there was something to look forward to, it was Ari's behavior and Lizzy's reactions. At least I might get some enjoyment out of today.

Sitting down on my bed, I activated my omnitool and began using my right index finger to scroll my way through mail and messages.

A mail from Terra Firma trying to get me to register for their party. Holos of humans going about their day on human worlds. I kept waiting for it to get to the point. 'Humanity first!' Seriously? That was it? Someone got paid to make this? These xenophobe lunatics had too much time on their hands. Delete.

A discount offer for a subscription to Fornax. A vid played of an female drell getting, uh, familiar with... was that... a hanar? But where were the tentacles... oh. Ewww. Gross. Nope. Nope. Delete.

Several brochures from human universities throughout Alliance Space. Most of them on Earth, a handful on Reach and Elysium. Hmm, I think that one is on Eden Prime. Still, all of them were for schools I hadn't signed up for. Thank you, Abuela. Delete.

An informational pamphlet for the Dalemitrians. We're all going to die, blah blah blah, save yourself and loved ones aboard the Citadel. Holos of warzones were mixed with ones I'm pretty sure were taken from action vids. Yep. That one is Salvation of Shanxi. These people had no scruples, and clearly no talent. Delete.

A combined request for donations to the Intergalactic Red Cross and Interplanetary Wildlife Fund. Give us your credits so we can help save the galaxy. Maybe, but only after we pay for the red sand and sex workers. Delete.

A UNSC enlistment pamphlet. Join the UNSC, travel to far away places, meet exotic people... and kill them. Actually, I'm paraphrasing. It's more like 'If it ain't human, we're gonna ask it to identify itself in a human language once. If it doesn't, then we shoot.' Delete.

A response from the Bekenstein government and CAA notifying me that my application for a sky vehicle was... denied?! For what? You've got to be kidding me. Unsafe driving practices? That was not my fault! The skycar was on autopilot! The damn VI should have known better! Ugh. Delete

Clearing my head I swiped to the next mail. Sign up sheets for sports programs this year. Hmmm. Basketball, run and jump around with a ball? Sure. Football, run around and kick a ball? Sure. Track and Field, run around for no reason? Nope. Save.

More extracurricular activities for the coming school year. Nothing on this list caught my attention, but I had until the end of October to join. I'd have to talk to my grandparents and Lizzy about which ones would look good on a college application. Save.

A notice and sign up sheet for an upcoming dance. I cringed. My grandmother always forced me to attend these things. Mom had insisted we have dance lessons since we were kids and my grandmother had carried on the practice when we came to live with her. She had been relaxed about forcing me to socialize for most of last year, giving

me time to grieve, but she still wanted me to get to know the other kids at school. Problem was I had nothing in common with any of the students at the private academy I attended. I'm still not sure if my classmates knew my real name since they called me Mindy most of the time.

It was difficult transitioning to life here during the last school year. The priorities and lifestyle were just so out of sync with what I was used to back on Mindoir. And if my ability to get a date was pathetic back home, then I'm sure it was going to reach levels unheard of in the history of the human race here on Bekenstein. I didn't wear the right clothes, listen to the right music or know the right people. No one wanted to talk to the farm kid from the outer colonies let alone date him.

Sighing and pushing the negative thought aside, I scanned the contents of my correspondences further. Nothing worthwhile grabbed my attention, or more likely gave me something to waste time. Figuring it was a lost cause, I shut my omnitool off and steeled myself to head downstairs.

Dragging my feet I walked out of my room and down the hallway. This wing of the estate had stained wooden floors and light brown faux adobe walls to give it an authentic and ancient Earth feel. The walls were decorated with art from several centuries of human history that carried on the style. From tribal style sculptures to impressionist paintings to early space colonial landscapes. Most of the time it was like I was in a museum as opposed to a home, mixing the past with the modern.

To make my point even more clear, a cleaning drone wandered into the hallway doing it's job. It moved past me, it's eezo core sending a pleasant hum through my body. I shivered and shook it off before continuing along my path down the stone steps. The downstairs was designed in much the same way, revealing a well lit cavernous open room with large bay windows facing out into the Teves Sea. A variety of couches and tables decorated in warm earth tones were spread out across the ground floor. It was a comfortable room including a parlor grand piano with a wooden finish and elaborate carvings, a brick fireplace and a few bookcases with real books. A rare thing in this day in age.

I walked over to the nearest shelf and fingered the tomes. Recognizing many I realized they were all from our bookcase back home on Mindoir. Some of the few things we were able to recover from the house that wasn't destroyed in the raid or looted by opportunists. I selected an older tome with a weathered leather spine and gold flake script that had long since fallen off so as to be unintelligible but I was very familiar with the volume. Cracking it open and the yellowed pages with black ink typeset revealed the name. A copy of The Iliad and the Odyssey printed in 1972. I must have read this several times when I was bored back home, imagining what it must have been like to live in an ancient empire, or even to discover their legacy. I even swore to myself that I would go around the galaxy and visit all of ancient historical sites just to say I saw them. But holding this book now in my hands, it filled me with nostalgia and longing. I almost wished it could transport me into the past on Mindoir with my parents still alive. That Mom and Dad would be walking in the front door, arriving for the family gathering and ready to roll their eyes in exasperation at events.

Blinking to hold back tears, I snorted at my childish dreams and closed the book, putting it back in its place on the shelf. Off to my left, my grandfather's voice broke the silence. "That was your mother's favorite. She insisted on taking it with her when she left for college and it followed her when she moved to that god forsaken planet."

I turned to look at him, taking in his commanding stature. Hector Gonzalez was never what you would call a big or strong man, but he carried himself with a level of self importance and entitlement that made up for it. He was slim and toned with slicked back salt and pepper hair. Ornately trimmed facial hair emphasized his defined and dusky features. A well tailored suit in a cream color with no tie and brown leather shoes finished the look. His demeanor and attitude told you he lived life by his own rules. A tumbler of some amber liquid sloshed and ice cubes rattled against the glass as he took a walk towards me, a proud fatherly smile on his face.

I looked down at the drink in his hands and the strong astringent smell caused my nose hairs to burn. I turned away and politely coughed into my right fist. My Abuelo laughed, slapping my on the shoulder as he took a sip of his liquid breakfast.

I raised an eyebrow and questioned his sanity. "Does Abuela Vivian know about you're drinking this early?"

He raised both eyebrows and grinned, giving me a clearly amused look. "Ah, I remember what it was like to be at your age. Zero understanding of relationships."

I was less than amused by his remark. I may not be the most observant person around, but even I knew that drinking this early wasn't a great idea. In fact, after watching what it did to my father, I wasn't a fan of drinking, period.

My grandfather took my silence and frown as an invitation to continue after taking another sip "After all these years, we've come to an understanding. She gets to run the show on days like this and I get to sit back and self medicate."

At my incredulous expression he chuckled and leaned in, whispering some great secret to me "You're not the only one that can't stand these things."

Okay. That was new. I had always figured he enjoyed the spectacle and games but I guess I was wrong.

My grandfather stepped away and took a seat on the nearest couch, a chesterfield made from varren leather. Leaning back into its plush cushions and placing his right ankle atop his left knee the man continued his observations "Of course I love seeing my family and friends, barring my mother in law, but it's the damn people they bring with them. And to make it worse, all of you little ones are getting to the age where you'll start bringing people to my table." He took a drink and scoffed, "Like that worthless bastard your uncle married."

I tensed as I knew what was coming. My grandfather was no fan of my father, disapproving of the marriage to his daughter. He didn't

disappoint. "And then your father. He took my baby, my Hannah, to the edge of the damn galaxy and let her die there. It's a miracle you and Araceli lived." He took another drink as a brooding look overcame his features, "Your sister Elizabeth, she's doing much to repair the damage. There's hope there, in her, and in you and Ari."

And there it was. The implied message, don't be a fuck up like your father and don't marry a fuck up like your mother did. Live up to the standards of this family. Be more like Lizzy.

I rolled my eyes and took a seat on another couch, a dull biege colored lawson made from synthetic material that mimicked natural organic fibers. In my year of living here I had more or less claimed this couch as my own. Everyone else claimed it was too harsh or unyielding but I found it to be soft and comfortable. I leaned back and stretched out, willing this day to move faster.

As my luck would have it, that wasn't meant to be since my Abuelo was of the mind to continue our one sided conversation. "Have you given any thoughts about college?"

I sighed and sat up, knowing my answer wasn't going to be well received, "Not really. I just never thought much about further education."

"Well you should." His dark brown eyes, so much like my own, held my gaze for a beat, challenging me to refute him. When I looked away, his tone softened, becoming more fatherly "You're good with electronics. Always playing with your omnitool or datapad. Even the terminal in your room. Maybe you could study that?"

I shrugged, not really believing that. It was more of a hobby than anything, not something that held my interest. I knew my strengths and I was no prodigy with electronics. I was more of a dreamer but I lacked any artistic skill. I was good at math and sciences, but not great. I just never thought I would be anything more than a farmer on Mindoir. I paused for a moment as my heart beat a little faster and my palms became sweaty. Could I voice that? It was the truth, and maybe I could get help or advice on what to do.

I glanced up at my grandfather to see him observing me shrewdly. Steeling my nerves I swallowed my fear and spoke my mind, "I... well I was thinking, maybe I could go back and restart the farm? Turn it into a real profitable business?" I swallowed again and the words just came pouring out of my mouth, "I kinda figured there were areas that I was always telling my parents that we could fix or change what we were growing or doing. We could really turn it into a powerhouse, and then possibly use that to buy more land on Mindoir and then start moving into the real estate and mining business there and..." I trailed off as I saw the disgusted look on his face.

"Absolutely. Not." His tone made it abundantly clear he wouldn't even entertain the notion. "If you want to setup the farm again, then by all means, but you can do so remotely, and pay others to take the risks and do the back breaking work." Shaking his head as if to clear away an unpleasant thought he continued "No. No more blood of mine will work in fields like common laborers. Your ancestors, my grandparents and their parents before them, worked farms so that we didn't have to. My parents worked menial jobs so that they could send me and my sister to universities. We are not taking a step back."

We sat in silence for a few more moments, the sloshing of his drink the only sound. I grabbed a nearby throw pillow, a black and white piece made with hexagonal shapes woven into it. I traced them with my finger, doing my best to calm my own temper. I was angry with myself for opening my big mouth. I shouldn't have said what I was thinking when I knew what the outcome would be.

Abuelo finished his drink and stood, giving me a look that meant business, "Find something you can go to college for. I don't care if it's writing poetry."

He sauntered out of the room, in the direction of his office, and personal bar located there, leaving me to stare out at the blue water of the Teves Sea and the glittering golden diamonds scattered across it's surface from reflecting the Boltzmann star.

* * *

><p>Sargasso, Bekenstein, Boltzmann System, Serpent Nebula; September 29th, 2571 [Standardized Terran Calendar], 1439 [Local Time]

"This meal was lovely, Vivian." Uncle Kamal's enthusiasm for the meal of grilled salmon in a tomato basil sauce with cheese enchiladas was genuine. He was a dark and handsome man, born on Earth in Central Asia. His coal black hair cut short and face clean shaven, the man was the holo perfect portrayal of military discipline and appearance, even if he was out of uniform tonight in a modern brown suit. An officer in the UNSC's Office of Naval Intelligence, he was privy to the deepest and darkest secrets of the human race. There was always something about the man that conveyed importance and seriousness, no matter what he did.

Abuela Vivian was radiant in a teal colored sleeveless dress and golden jewelry with turquoise stones as she absorbed the praise. True, she had a small army of VI controlled cooking drones helping her, but still, pretty damn impressive to put out a meal like this for a large group. Actually, when I think about it, she made the meal despite the interference from her grandchildren. I was waiting to see who found the chocolate surprise in their enchilada that Ari left as a prank.

"It's good to eat real food for a change and not pizza or something frozen." My cousin Saman echoed his father's opinion. Saman was a mixture of his mother, my Tia Alicia, and his father, Kamal. Green eyes and fair skin but dark hair and the same handsome features of his father. Carrying on his father's professional demeanor, he was mature beyond his years, attending MIT studying economics and mathematics.

To the right of me my sister Lizzy made a humming sound affirming our cousin's remark. "I've eaten so many tubes of nutrient paste I'm surprised I don't have ossilbir growing out of my ears."

My Tia Alicia laughed and took a sip of her glass of wine. If my mother had been dark and mysterious, my aunt was lighter in many ways. A social butterfly with a peach complexion, auburn hair and green eyes like her mother, she was a Minister for the Systems Alliance Diplomatic Corps attached to humanity's ambassador office on

the Citadel. Primarily spending her time at her office in the ambassador's block, she also alternated traveling the galaxy being a diplomat for the Systems Alliance and advising the Human Ambassador to the Citadel Council. Placing her glass back down she smiled and grilled my sister "Are you saying the young men of Harvard can't scrounge together some credits to take you out on dinner dates?"

Lizzy rolled her eyes, placing her fork down on her plate. "Hardly. Most of them think a dinner date is a guaranteed invitation to see me naked." She took a sip of her own glass of wine and continued, "I prefer to date older gentlemen from outside of school. At least they have some self control and can talk about something besides how many beers they downed before they blacked out last weekend."

Lifting her glass, Bisabuela Elvira glanced slyly at her great granddaughter and saluted her "Clever girl. They usually begin to understand the importance of conversation and foreplay by the time they're thirty."

There were groans and laughter around the table, punctuated by Tia Alicia chiming in "You're being far too generous, Abuela. It's been my experience that they're just good at faking it by the time they're thirty."

Her husband looked askance at her but grinning at the jab that obviously was aimed at him. Her son looked affronted and slightly confused but if he was expecting reassurance, he was sorely disappointed by his mother's response "Oh don't look at me like that. If you're like your father, I'm sure you'll do fine." She paused and waited a beat before dropping the other shoe, "By the time you're in your mid to late twenties."

"I don't want to hear about my parents and brother screwing. Can we please change the subject?" Across the table from me, my cousin Linda, one year younger than me, wore a nauseated look while pushing the food around on her plate. Like her older brother, she was a mixture of the best her parents had to offer. A dazzling beauty with long wavy black hair and amber colored eyes, she had all the hallmarks of being the most stunning member of the family, and also the most petulant.

Nathan, my Tio Julian's husband, leaned forward and agreed in his french tinged accent. "Well besides the dating scene at college, how are the two of you enjoying living on Earth? And the New England weather?" Nathan was a tall and muscular African man, with strong masculine features and a way of carrying himself that evoked aristocracy and nobility. Always well dressed and groomed, my Tia and Abuela would coo over his good looks and gentlemanly demeanor but my Abuelo made no bones about loathing him, much to my grandmother's annoyance. Unlike Bisabuela Elvira's loathing of biotics and asari, it wasn't bigotry that fueled my grandfather's annoyance, but rather the lifestyle that Nathan and my uncle lived. They operated their own public relations and management consulting firm, arranging meetings and parties behind the scenes for the biggest movers and shakers in the galaxy. They seemed to chase after credits and connections as opposed to any ideology or agenda. I suppose my grandfather viewed them as having no allegiances and thus no honor. Something he was sure was due to Nathan's influence on his son.

Saman shrugged, chewing a mouthful of food and politely swallowing before answering. "It's different to be around so many humans all the time after growing up on the Citadel. I think there's maybe a single asari in all of my classes. But the weather's not bad, no worse than Reach whenever we visited there."

Bisabuela snorted and shook her head, unable to refrain from taking the bait about living in mixed society. "It'll do you some good to be around your own kind."

The adults took that opportunity to shift the conversation, droning on and on and reminiscing about their college years. I looked over at Ari seated next to me only to see she had her head down and hands fiddling in her lap under the table. Leaning back a bit, I saw she had activated her omnitool under the table and was operating a program to hack into other omnitools. I nudged her with my elbow, frowning at her. It's not that I disapproved, like that would matter to her, but she was pushing the limits here. She was bound to be caught.

Ari glanced at me nervously, her cute face twisted into a countenance of paranoia that was commonplace given her impish nature. She was wearing a dark red summer dress with a matching headband that held back her curly dark brown locks. She was beginning to really sprout, becoming very tall and long limbed with all of the grace of a vorcha. She didn't have as many problems transitioning into Bekenstein life seeing as how her good looks and outgoing personality saw to it that she was readily received by her new classmates, nonetheless she still stuck out amongst the locals.

"Luis, what about you?" My Tio Julian's question caught me off guard. I looked his direction, clearly having no clue what they were talking about, and bashfully smiled and shrugged, hoping that was the correct response.

No such luck. Lizzy saw what I had been looking at and immediately pounced, "Araceli Lindsay Shepard! What are you doing with your omnitool?"

I cringed, partly because I knew I had been the reason she was busted and partly because my sister had perfected the tone and inflection our mother used to use when saying full names. Beside me, Ari quickly turned off her omnitool and placed her hands on the table, a charming smile on her face. "Nothing."

"Talking with boys?" Linda's question was earnest and excited. While she didn't seem to care about the immediate family's exploits, she had no problem digging into the social lives of everyone else. "I'd kill to be able to attend a school here on Bekenstein. Instead it's that boring academy on the Citadel."

Ari arched an eyebrow, clearly taken aback by the non sequitur. She took a moment to think through her options before slowly nodding. Luck would be on her side as our Aunt saved her from further explanation.

"There is nothing boring about the T'Vranas Preparatory Academy. It's an honor to be attending and taught by asari matrons, Linda." Tia Alicia's reprimand was quick and stern. In a flash my Aunt had been replaced by diplomat Gonzalez, showing exactly why she flourished in

the profession. Linda had the good grace to look ashamed although that slowly soured into a sulk as she frowned off into the distance, looking anywhere but at her mother.

In the awkward silence that followed the quick family byplay I could literally see everyone thinking of subjects to bring up to move the conversation forward. My Tio Julian, the spitting image of his father, my grandfather, as a younger man, homed in on me yet again. "Well, the question still stands, what are you planning on doing for college?"

Wonderful. The subject I dreaded the most. I could feel the pressure building, the stares and expectant faces. I glanced to my right and saw Lizzy was watching me carefully, examining my every move. Looking beyond her towards the head of the table, my grandfather wore a similar look. I quirked a smile to my face to relieve the tension. "I'm not really sure. So many options."

It was a simple and honest answer, but I knew the crowd of professionals at the table would all have their own input on the matter. I didn't have to wait long.

"Well that makes sense. It's often best to keep your options open." Leave it to my grandmother to put a positive spin on my inability to make a decision.

Nathan frowned and asked in his trademark polite but condescending way "You're not sure what you want to do? Or you're not sure what you're good at?"

My grandfather immediately glared at him, but an even sterner glare from my grandmother helped him keep his tongue in check.

Resorting to my habit of rubbing the back of my neck when apprehensive, I once again fingered the bioamp implant there. I was suddenly hit with inspiration, or a suicidal impulse. "Well, I'm a biotic. Maybe I could do something with that?"

As soon as the words left my mouth I regretted them. Bisabuela Elvira's fork stopped mid motion to her mouth and she gave me a long and anguished look. Glancing around the rest of the table I got a mixture of bewildered or confused looks. But oddly Lizzy's expression was the worst, bordering on rage.

And boy she didn't hold back in chastising me, "Are you kidding? The only thing biotics are good for is causing destruction. That's why the military and terrorists employ them. Are you trying to say that you want to join the military?" She stared at me, her cheeks reddening and chest heaving as her anger and frustration was apparent.

Tio Kamal narrowed his eyes sharply at Lizzy's implied insult towards the UNSC but didn't say anything.

To my left Ari jumped into the conversation, offended by our sister's remarks about biotics. "That's not true! We can do search and rescue, since we can lift heavy debris. And Matron Malegos said that that law enforcement is another good place where biotics are needed. Or there's biotiball. We can become professional athletes playing that. Plus, nobody fully understands why we're different than other people

in the galaxy. There is tons of stuff to research and learn." Her face was also reddening as she took a deep breath, before cattily tossing a verbal barb back at our sister, "You're just upset that you're a biotic and can't hide it forever."

Lizzy leaned forward to look past me and at Ari, a fierce scowl on her face. "You don't know the first thing about what it's like to be a biotic. If people at college knew I'd be shunned and ostracized. The two of you are coddled being taught by that asari. It's no big deal to them, they're all biotics, but it's not natural for humans. They assume you're a criminal or a terrorist unless you work for the military, in which case they know you're a murderer."

Bisabuela hummed her approval at Lizzy's rant, raising her wine glass in a salute.

I felt a surge of anger spike in me. I didn't like it when the comments were made this morning about biotics. I didn't like it now when Lizzy talking about me that way. And I damn sure didn't like her talking about Ari that way. Before either of us could respond, our grandfather brought the argument to an end. "Enough. This is a conversation to be had later, when the three of you have calmed down."

Yet again an awkward silence descended on the table and yet again my Tio Julian was the one to break it. "Speaking of biotics, heads up to all of you. We just hosted a fundraiser for Terra Firma on Elysium and most of the rhetoric was that they're going to roadblock the legislation that would give reparation payments to the L2 recipients. Maybe they'll revisit the topic of funding replacements systems after the election cycle."

"Good. Glad to know someone has their priorities straight." Bisabuela Elvira nodded her head at her grandson's news, no doubt pleased with the slant against biotics that the discussion was taking around the dinner table. If she could hear that the Systems Alliance was declaring war against the Asari Republics then it would probably make her day.

Abuela Vivian gave her mother an exasperated glance before reverting to her business mode as a corporate lawyer. "I figured as much. Susan Koenig had mentioned to a colleague of mine that Conatix is planning on fighting the Alliance court's decision, appealing to the Council courts if necessary. Makes sense when you consider the amount of L2 implants still on the market. If everyone has to destroy their stock, they're going to sue Conatix for reimbursement. And that's not even getting into lawsuits from those who've been implanted with the systems. The Alliance can't run fast enough away from that topic after they implanted so many people with those systems. Between that and the negative press after that murder in their academy, Conatix might have to fold if they can't get ahead of this situation."

"Fantastic. As if Sidon wasn't bad enough. The turian embassy still can't stop talking about that." Tia Alicia leaned back in her seat and sighed, idly twisted her wine glass on the table. "We're still trying to get the Council offices to lift the freezes on colonization for Therum and Feros but every time one of these incidents occurs, they use it to stall talks and buy time."

Nathan smiled and replied, "Well at least the jellyfishes stopped protesting and having demonstrations over the colonization of Prothean sites? That's progress."

Tia Alicia rolled her eyes and took a drink of her wine, "That's only because we gave the go ahead for them to jointly colonize Proteus. That bit of political footwork was a nightmare I never want to relive. First we had to handle the influx of petitions to build Enkindler shrines across the ocean floor then I swear our offices received death threats from every person on Terra Firma's rolls. Twice."

Tio Kamal chimed in, his blunt and precise manner of speaking a contrast to his wife's more emotive and physical style, "It's the insurrectionists I'm worried about. The separatist governments on Venezia, Anhur, Trident and Horizon are close to forming their own organized military forces which will give cover to formalized training of insurrectionists. If the situation with the L2's becomes worse then they'll use it to recruit biotics."

"And I take it the Alliance is holding the UNSC back from preemptively attacking these colonies?" Abuelo Hector leaned forward in interest, mind processing the angles and possible outcomes. While his profession was genetic research and patents, he was keenly aware of the happenings of the Systems Alliance and UNSC, his two biggest customers.

Kamal nodded at my grandfather's astute observations, "With the operations in Sigurd's Cradle, the Council is already paranoid about being stretched thin in the event of a Covenant attack. They've become squeamish and hesitant to provoke other factions in the Terminus. The last thing they want is a unified front when the move is made to retake Omega from the pirate filth there. Unfortunately, that means ignoring a growing threat in those colonies."

Saman joined in, questioning the logic of such a maneuver. "Does the Council really think Omega will be that easy to take? They lost it centuries ago. There must be a reason they've yet to try to reclaim it?"

Interestingly, my Tio Julian seemed to know the answer to that. "Well besides everyone being terrified of provoking the Covenant with the expansion of Council space, it's no secret that the Hegemony funds the warlord there, T'Loach or something."

"T'Loak. An old but dangerous asari. Former commando." Kamal corrected with a dark expression. It made me wonder if he had personal dealings with her to know just how dangerous.

Nodding, Julian continued, "Right, T'Loak. Like your father said, she's older, having been backed by the Hegemony in a coup for power in the late nineteen hundreds. Since then she's solidified her base and brought many of the factions that frequent Omega into her grasp. She's powerful. Too powerful. She's recently been jerking on the Hegemony's chain, increasing prices on eezo, which is the whole reason they backed her in the first place. Between her antics and age, the belief is the Hegemony is going to replace her sometime soon. But with Council fleets one short relay jump away protecting official colonies now, it's making them nervous. Any attempt to replace this warlord will leave a power vacuum, with all the Terminus

factions fighting it out. Without a unified response, they'll be easy pickings for Council forces to defeat and take the station, and it's eezo supplies, for themselves."

I nodded to myself. That was a deceptively simple plan. A waiting game. Either the warlord would die in a few centuries or she would do something stupid. Either way the Hegemony would be forced to replace her to protect their primary source of eezo, resulting in a battle over Omega that they and the Terminus pirates were bound to lose. Still it was a major gamble that the increased colonization and military presence of Council forces wouldn't trigger a new war with the Covenant, who were impossible to predict.

"All this talk of war and military is boring and hardly appropriate for the dinner table." Abuela Vivian interjected after seeing the conversation had lost the interest of other family members.

My grandfather sat back and waved away his wife's concerns "Nonsense. This all has serious implications about our government and the galaxy as a whole. The prices of element zero, production materials, colonization, legislation, exploration. It's all tied in."

Lizzy chewed on her lip, clearly conflicted and fighting herself to say something. She took a sip of wine and cleared her throat, looking pained and nervous as she directed her question towards Tio Kamal "Tio, is there any truth to the claims that the pirates that attacked Hegemony space being backed by the Alliance? As revenge?"

He froze and considered the question, still obviously aware of her dig against the military earlier, but slowly nodded. "I don't have any direct knowledge of our participation in that raid but I wouldn't doubt it."

Lizzy stared at her plate and nodded, a grim but satisfied look on her face. In many ways, she took the death of our parents the hardest. She had an adult relationship with them, particularly close with our mother. She carried guilt that she wasn't there and able to help save them in some way, misguided as it was. And she definitely held batarians accountable for what had happened. We all did.

Returning to the present and the dinner conversation at hand, I could clearly sympathize with my sister in her black musings. While most of the people who lived in the Indris system had nothing to do with the raid on Mindoir, it did feel good, no matter how perverse the feeling, that batarians had died. Serves the four eyed bastards right.

"Will any of this affect our plans for attending fashion week and the Luminary Gala on Illium next year?" Linda's remark once again hit the non sequitur mark. I could almost appreciate the combination of perturbed and displeased expressions around table if she hadn't been callously ignoring the degree of significance the conversation had. Her aunt, my mother, had died. Murdered by Terminus pirates operating under Hegemony influence. We were discussing the possibility that the raids were payback for that attack. Was too much to ask that she fake having empathy for anyone besides herself?

"What? I was just- OW!" Linda was insulted that anyone took offense to her seemingly innocent question before a rush of static

electricity washed over me. My cousin jumped back in her seat with a look of pain on her face. I blinked owlshly, positive that it wasn't me that had used biotics. A quick glance to my left confirmed that as Ari was covered in a corona of purple energy and her face had scowled into something fierce that I hadn't seen since we were running and fighting for our lives on Mindoir. Her right arm was extended, the hand facing forward with the palm. Her posture tensed and then relaxed, releasing her grip on a nonexistent object as the aura around her faded that could only mean one thing. She had created a warp field.

Jumping from her seat she screamed around tears as she picked up a half eaten enchilada from her plate and threw it at Linda with enough force to cause a loud splat as it connected with the other girl's fluorescent pink and purple dress, "My parents died because of shit like this! I don't give a fuck about your Luminary Gala you stuck up bitch!"

"Araceli!" Abuelo Hector's roar of anger nearly shook the room as everyone else was shocked into silence and inaction.

If she was frightened, she wasn't showing it as she screamed right back at him, "Shut up! I hate you! You don't care that my dad died. You think it was a good thing. I hate you!" She turned around and stormed out of the dining room.

My Tia Alicia and Tio Kamal rushed to their daughter, who was terrified into silent sobs. From what I could see she had bruising to her left leg, but nothing serious. Given our progress this morning, neither Ari or myself were much beyond being able to move and manipulate small objects. The worst she could have done was the equivalent of a hard slap.

Bisabuela Elvira turned and glared at Abuela Vivian, berating her for not listening to her advice, "You see? I warned you. Nothing good comes from biotics or asari."

In the commotion and din I felt my sister Lizzy grab me by my ear and lead me out of the room. Once we were clear of the dining room I jerked away and rubbed my sore ear. "Ow! Let go, damn it!"

"Shut up. This is all your fault." Lizzy was livid and looked close to swinging on me. I couldn't even fathom how she came to that conclusion. How the fuck did I cause this? When my annoyance was obvious Lizzy leaned in and poked me repeatedly in the chest. "Bringing up the conversation about biotics and the military was your fault. Why can't either of you be normal?"

I slapped away her hand as my temper was close to boiling over. Ari overreacted but blaming me or ignoring Linda's insensitive remark was just plain stupid. Putting her hands on me, twice, was pushing it. "First off, stop touching me. Secondly, that was your parents too that she ignored. You could try being more upset unless you're too busy brown nosing everyone else trying to make yourself seem more important than you are, Elizabeth Shepard."

I enunciated her name to remind her of who her family was and where she came from, but all I got for my troubles was a vicious slap to face. I steeled myself as my inner rage demon thrashed about within me, urging me to rock her head off of her shoulders with as strong of

a punch as I could. A series of deep breaths brought about a lid to the tumultuous emotions bursting forth in my mind. Around tears from the stinging sensation of being slapped and the emotional responses it was bringing about, I said through clenched teeth, "Don't you ever put your hands on me again, bitch."

With that I slipped past, deliberately slamming my shoulder into her and not stopping to see if she was okay. All I heard from behind me was Lizzy letting out a shuddering sigh and choked sob.

* * *

><p>Sargasso, Bekenstein, Boltzmann System, Serpent Nebula; September 29th, 2571 [Standardized Terran Calendar], 1801 [Local Time, Terran Standard]

It took me forever, but I found Ari hiding in one of the conservatories that simulated the Great Victoria Desert, complete with red sand and vegetation like Australian Spinifex, Eucalyptus and Mulga trees.

Sitting on a rock she was lifting small objects with her biotics before dropping them. Intellectually, I was impressed, and more than a bit jealous, with her control and strength. I definitely couldn't perform feats like this with my biotics.

Yet. I couldn't perform them yet. I had to keep reminding myself of Matron Malegos' lesson this morning.

I just sat down on a nearby rock and silently we worked on our biotics. In what seemed like no time at all, we were both sweaty and exhausted from the heat and our exertions. In a silent exchange of nods and pointing, we left the conservatory and walked towards the edge of the property and sat near the cliffs overlooking the Teves Sea.

Leaning back on my elbows with my legs stretched out in front of me I enjoyed the soft cool breeze coming off the body of water that was combating the oppressive heat in the air. I looked to my left and watched Ari hugging herself tightly, knees tight into her chest, arms wrapped around her legs, and chin resting atop her knees. The illuminated red strands in her hair pulsed in a slow rhythm as it billowed in the breeze while she stared off into the distance.

I'm not too sure how long we sat out there, but I do know that we had been gone long enough that Lizzy and Abuela Vivian came looking for us. They remained silent for a beat as neither of us greeted them. After a moment, Abuela Vivian sat down on the grass between the two of us and pulled us both into a hug. "I know that it feels like people don't care at times, but that's no excuse to lash out the way you did."

Ari jerked away and stood, tears in her eyes, "You all talk about my dad like he was some evil monster. He didn't do anything wrong and none of you care that he died."

I hung my head as I wished I had the courage to speak out the way Ari did. It just wasn't in me to be that vocal or disruptive. Being outspoken was a trait that Lizzy and Ari had in spades, as evidenced by Lizzy's rebuttal "No one said our father was a monster, but you

can't ignore that their marriage was falling apart. That's what everyone remembers."

"That's enough Elizabeth." Abuela Vivian's reproach was soft and gentle. She gently rapped my shoulder and then motioned that we should get up. I stood and offered her a hand which she accepted with a smile. Dusting off her dress and legs, Abuela Vivian motioned for all of us to follow her, but instead of heading back towards the house, we headed for the walkway that lead a circuitous path around the property.

We followed her as she walked ahead, hands clasped behind her back as if she were out strolling her property without a care in the world. My sisters and I seemed to be awkwardly bunched up following in her wake, trying to avoid bumping into each other, afraid of having to speak.

As we neared the edge of the property our Abuela finally stopped, looking exhausted from the heat. We stood around not quite sure what to do or say. Ari seemed to be in a glowering funk that she was stuck stewing in, standing off to the side with her arms crossed. Lizzy mimicked her posture, looking off in another direction with an air of being above the entire debacle. All three of these women seemed to be content to let the tension rise as none of them spoke, making me feel increasingly anxious. Deciding to be brave and test the waters, I chose something light and easy, "So, is Linda okay?"

Lizzy scoffed to my right but my Abuela turned around and nodded at me with a smile, thankful for some reason, "She'll be fine. More scared and embarrassed than anything." Her smile melted as she gave Ari a less than pleased stare "Something we can all be thankful for."

Ari shrugged and rolled her eyes, "She deserved it."

On automated impulse, Lizzy's head whipped around to stare at her sister, but before she could voice her thoughts, our grandmother spoke in a strong voice "No, she didn't. You know she didn't."

Shoulders sagging and eyes downcast at the stern but gentile reprimand, Ari stared at the ground near her feet but said nothing. Encouraged that her words had some effect, Abuela Vivian continued, "You and your brother never asked for any of this to happen and your lives have been torn asunder. Turned upside down and nothing makes sense anymore. You're scared and hurt, still, and probably forever, but you're taking that out on the wrong people." She stepped forward and lifted Ari's chin with her right hand so she could look her in the eyes, "You and your brother have an incredible gift, one that I had no problem securing training for. Your grandfather, who you yelled at, had no problem paying for it. Your Tia Alicia and Tio Kamal, whose daughter, your cousin, that you attacked, had no problem securing the waivers to keep you from being sent to an academy."

Ari jerked away and looked at our grandmother defiantly, "I know. I'm sorry, but I hear what you all say about our parents when you think we're not listening."

Having been quiet for far longer than I gave her credit for, Lizzy burst forth with indignation "Will you listen to reason for once you

child? Your grandmother just pointed out how much the people in this family have done for your ungrateful skinny ass. You just spit in their faces tonight and all you can whine about is what you think they're saying about our parents? Our father?"

I glared at Lizzy, upset with her for always taking the side of others in argument whenever her own family was involved. It was like she ignored reality or, even worse, agreed with what was said at times. And why wouldn't she? As I had been repeatedly told, be more like Lizzy.

"Think? You think I'm making this up?" Ari stood with arms akimbo as she stared our sister down with just as much anger, "I heard what Abuelo said to our brother today, Lizzy. Today!"

My head jerked in her direction as I felt mortified. She had heard my weak ramblings and our grandfather's refusal to listen? My face went red as my Abuela and Lizzy both looked at me curiously, wondering what had been said.

As was my trait, I rubbed the back of my neck, looking at the ground for inspiration. Looking up, I took a deep breath and chuckled, "Well, it was really silly, and I should have known he wasn't going to go for it. And-"

"You're rambling. What happened?" Abuela Vivian's eyes had narrowed, probably already knowing what had been said. She knew her husband better than anyone else and could predict what sort of things he might have implied.

Nodding, I swallowed back a lump of saliva and fear and answered her, "He asked what I planned to do about college and I might have said that I wanted to go back and restart the farm on Mindoir."

I cringed as my grandmother's eyes dimmed and she nodded resignedly. Beside me, Lizzy let out a disgusted grunt and stared into the heavens, shaking her head. Ari, however, looked thunderous. "That's not what happened. He called our father worthless and said he left mom to die on Mindoir! He pretty much pointed out that you and me should be more like Lizzy and less like our parents!"

"Araceli, calm yourself. I understand you're upset, but screaming and yelling isn't going to help the situation." Once again my grandmother was calming and motherly, but I could see the frustration clearly on her face. Problem was I didn't know who or what she was frustrated with. Somehow, I got the impression it was with my idea of going back to be a farmer.

Breaking the silence of the moment, Lizzy murmured "He's right."

I was stunned. I'd always thought my sister felt that way, but to hear her say it... there are no words. She thought our father was worthless. That our mother fucked up by marrying him.

Ari was so tense she was practically vibrating in place, and I absentmindedly began observing her out of the corner of my eye for any telltale sign she might use her biotics again.

Abuela Vivian seemed to have the same idea as she watched her as well, before addressing Lizzy, "Your grandfather is many things, but

right about your mother and father is not one of them. He never approved of your mother following her heart and marrying your father or moving to Mindoir. But she did it for all the right reasons. She loved your father, and after one day with the two of them, I saw that he loved her just as much."

The tension in the air dissipated as we all listened attentively. We rarely ever heard of stories or details regarding our parents' relationship from someone besides them. Abuela smiled as she continued, "They may have been naïve about what it would mean to live on the outer colonies, but they wanted the chance to establish themselves away from everything. They wanted to earn their own way and create something without the charity or help of others." She looked at the three of us and shook her head, "You have no idea how much each of you embody so much of their character. Lizzy, you're so determined and strong, just like they were. Nothing could deter them from what they wanted."

She looked at me and continued, "You have the same casual and sweet temperament of your father combined with your mother's caring instincts. You do things for the right reasons, not ulterior motives."

I blushed and hung my head, although I noticed she didn't mention that I was determined or strong. I wondered what she would say about Ari, and more importantly, what that said about me?

"And Araceli. You're so much like your mother it's frightening. Not just in looks but in behavior. The youngest and the boldest. Impetuous and reckless." Abuela chuckled as she recalled the past, "And just like your mother, you have the habit of terrorizing your older siblings."

Lizzy interjected, upset at the discussion, and seemingly more than a little ashamed at her earlier remark. "But none of that matters, Nana. They're dead now, and even if they had lived, they were getting a divorce."

What?

This was news to me, and apparently Ari too. Curiously, I noticed it wasn't a shock to my grandmother, who simply nodded as if it was a known fact. How long had everyone known this? Why hadn't they told me or Ari?

Sensing the confusion and anger coming from the youngest two people in the conversation, our Abuela smiled sadly, "The day of the attack she was going to serve your father with the digital forms. By that evening, she planned to have the both of you with her on a transport here to Bekenstein."

Rage and resentment bubbled in my chest at the thought. She wasn't just cheating on him, but she was going to divorce him and then leave him there? What if the attack had happened a day later? We'd be hearing about how our father, who had been kicked while he was down, was then murdered by Terminus pirates. All for what? So that my mother could live out her happy ending with whatever guy it is she was fucking? I turned around and stalked off, pacing back and forth as I search for something to punch or kick. When nothing came to mind I eyed a patch of grass and focused, willing the fury in me to fuel

my biotics. With a practiced motion I thrust my right palm out, the mnemonic motion of slamming the object of my desire with rapidly shifting mass effect fields. My whole body burst in a painful tingle, almost numbing, my vision was blurred by purple, and the patch of grass in front of me exploded. Chunks of dirt and clumps of grass flew in different directions, some smacking me in the face and arms.

Light headed and swaying in place but thoroughly satisfied, I turned around to see the amazement and even fear in the eyes of my sisters and grandmother. Ari about summed up the display, "Whoa."

Lizzy came to her senses and went into lecture mode without delay, "What is wrong with both of you? Is that how you two react to anything that upsets you? Blow it up? Or whatever that was?"

"Relax, Lizzy, it was just a warp field. We're not even that good at it. You guys said Linda was fine, right?" answering Lizzy with a roll of her eyes, Ari derided our sister's hysterics.

Both Lizzy and our grandmother looked at Ari with shock and more than a little horror. It was our grandmother that spoke up first, still not quite believing what she just heard, "You used that on Linda?"

"We haven't practiced or developed the strength to create a warp field that strong. It's mostly enough to hit and pull in different directions." Ari shrugged off their concern with her usual casual demeanor before eying me with renewed interest, "Although someone's been holding out. How long have you been able to hit that hard with a warp?"

I shrugged, not at all sure how to explain what I just did. My performance this morning was me trying my hardest. But that? I have no clue where that came from. I suppose Matron Malegos' message sunk in? I didn't even think about failing, I just did it.

Lizzy looked on flabbergasted and a bit sickened by the two of us, but it was our Abuela that voiced her concerns. "The both of you are to never again use your biotics to harm someone or strike out in anger, do I make myself clear?" At both of our nods, she continued, less than pleased with the knowledge of just what we were learning, "And I intend to have a conversation with your instructor. I wasn't aware that she is teaching children how to blow things up."

Ari cringed and I felt a shiver of fear run down my spine as I could imagine the reaction Matron Malegos would have when she learned that we both had been heedless in the usage of our gifts.

Again, the silence enveloped us, and now the setting sun was rapidly cooling down the warm early spring atmosphere of Bekenstein. The planet may be hotter than Mindoir, but we lived in the northern temperate zone, which had the annoying habit of becoming pretty damn cold at night. For a pair of kids that grew up on the equator of a tropical colony the cold held our fascination for all of five minutes before we preferred heat.

As the moments ticked by I gathered my courage yet again to ask about Mindoir and our family home. "So, do you think it was stupid of me to ask about restarting the farm?"

I wasn't too sure who I was asking in particular, but I wanted to know. I still had no clue what I wanted to do regarding college, and I was hoping to get some real advice.

Lizzy seemed to tense and wouldn't look at me, which I found strange given her need to berate me today, but my grandmother brought my attention to herself by voicing her thoughts "Well it certainly explains your reaction during the meal today." She cleared her throat before continuing, finding a way to be diplomatic as she lowered the hammer on me, "I think it would be a waste of potential for you to live out the rest of your life as a farmer. You're smart and charming, when you put your mind to it, and I don't think being a farmer is what you're meant to do. I think you choose it because it's familiar and comfortable." She hesitated before continuing, " And I'm not quite sure why you would want to return to the place your parents were killed and where you nearly died."

I nodded, understanding her assessment. It made sense, when you looked at it objectively, and I was feeling more than a bit ashamed at how she pointed out that I was essentially taking the 'easy' route in life. I looked at Ari, but the best answer she could give was a shrug and overwhelmed look.

Turning back to Lizzy, she still couldn't look at me. In fact, she almost appeared apprehensive of me. I know she and I had been at each other's throats today, more so than usual, but I she didn't think I would hurt her, did she? Maybe my impulsive act with biotics had scared her? I lowered my head to make eye contact with her and softly said her name, "Lizzy?"

She looked up, fearful and pained. Looking around at our grandmother and sister but seeing no help, she returned her gaze to my eyes and swallowed. Opening her mouth several times to speak, she couldn't voice what was on her mind.

Closing her eyes and blowing out a breath, Lizzy finally spoke in a calm and almost reciting manner. "I sold the farm to the Mindoir CAA. I've split the credits three ways and put your shares into trust funds for the two of you." Having released this secret burden on her soul, Lizzy opened her eyes and fearfully waited for a reaction.

To say I was livid was an understatement. I didn't even know where to begin. That she sold the farm, our home? That she did it without asking me or Ari our opinion? That she decided what was best not only with the property but then with the credits? Then again I shouldn't be surprised. This was typical Lizzy knows best at her finest.

I thought of so many different things to say. So many different things to do. But Ari beat me to the punch and put it perfectly. "You had no right to do that, but I doubt you care. This is just one more way to erase your past and forget you were from Mindoir. You can keep the credits." With that she turned around and marched off, back in the direction of the house.

I lingered longer, staring at my sister who seemed meek and afraid, so unlike her usual self. A glance at my grandmother gave me a further clue to the level of duplicity my sister had enacted. This was news to her, and she was pissed, to say the least. The way she stared at my sister let me know that the moment I left, she was going

to rip into Lizzy like no other.

Deciding that I could do no better than Ari or my Abuela, I just glared at Lizzy one last time and shook my head before turning on my heel to jog and catch up with Ari. There was a lot we had to talk about.

* * *

><p>Codex Entry: Bekenstein

The colony world of Bekenstein is one of the crown jewels of the human race and a display of their progress on the galactic stage.

It's colonization began with the negotiations following the Relay 314 Incident/First Contact War. As reparations for the attack on Shanxi the Systems Alliance was awarded the rights to nearby star clusters which would fuel the third wave of human colonization. During a fact finding mission to the Citadel a delegate for the Systems Alliance noted there was an uninhabited solar system with a marginally habitable planet within the Serpent Nebula. Representatives for the Council noted that while rich in potential, the system lay 67 light years from the Widow System and it's relay, thus making it undesirable for development. Human negotiators quickly requested and were awarded the rights to the system.

The Systems Alliance promptly commissioned an in depth analysis which revealed the primary planet in question required slight modification via terraforming but could be inhabitable for first phase colonization within twenty years. Further surveying found the system to have rich nodes of resources including several element zero deposits from meteor debris.

Satisfied with the prospects, the Systems Alliance awarded the project to the Weyland Group who put together a multiphase proposal designed to exploit the abundant resources and proximity to the heart of galactic civilization, the Citadel.

Infrastructure was quickly built stretching to the newly named Boltzmann System, helping to facilitate the resource extraction and terraforming project. Due to the distance, fuel costs heavily affected profit margins but the Weyland Group and Systems Alliance assured investors, corporate partners, and prospective colonists that this was anticipated.

The first open air surface colonies were founded in the extreme northern and southern latitudes in 2512. Those colonies would provide the industrial fabrication foundation for the Bekenstein economy. Using resources being harvested in system they would capitalize on the craze and fascination with the newest member of the Citadel Charter, Humans. From replicas of ancient Egyptian sarcophagi and Chinese terra cotta warriors to modern designs of household appliances and furniture, human culture was in demand and no other colony was as poised as Bekenstein to take advantage.

The influx of wealth fueled a boom in growth which coupled with an industrial fabrication base specializing in luxury goods created an attractive destination for those looking to make their fortunes. Soon the growing financial and cultural centers in the capital of Milgrom

were joined by space docks in orbit run by Sinoviet Heavy Machinery, Nashan Stellar Dynamics and Reyes-McLees Shipyards crafting custom luxury ships for the wealthy clientele of Bekenstein and the Citadel.

Seeing an opportunity to expand beyond the niche of luxury goods and catering to the fledgling wealthy colonists, the Weyland group encouraged the government of Bekenstein to relax their laws and regulations. The result was nearly every major human corporation moving their headquarters to Milgrom to take advantage of lowered tax rates and bureaucracy, turning it into one of the most important cities in the Systems Alliance.

In the decades since Bekenstein has become a rising power in economic, political and cultural influence throughout not just human space, but all of Council Space. Milgrom, which has been the fastest growing city in Council Space for twenty five consecutive years, now boasts financial and corporate sectors that rival anything found on Irune, Thessia, Sur'Kesh, Palaven, or Earth.

Only Illium fares better and there in lies the key Bekenstein's current success. Bekenstein has molded itself as being a more reputable alternative to Illium, which has prided itself on being a more reputable Omega or Tortuga. Luring in corporations with the most business friendly taxation and regulations in Council Space, Bekenstein is becoming synonymous with being a place where the wealthy, powerful, ambitious and ruthless can live and do business legally.

With such an open and aggressive stance, it's no wonder Bekenstein has flourished since it's inception. The original colonists and miners who operated on razor thin profit margins less than a century ago had a saying that has proven true even after their colony has undergone radical and amazing changes.

"If you can make it on Bek, you got 'em by the neck."

* * *

><p>Codex Entry: Element ZeroMass
Effect/Slipstream**

Mastery of dark energy is the hallmark of an advanced space faring civilization. More than simply allowing for faster than light travel, the manipulation of dark energy fields is crucial to every facet of modern technology.

Sitting atop the traditional, or Euclidean, three physical and one temporal dimensions is a bundle of eleven known dimensions collectively known as the Slipstream, or informally as Slipspace. This layer of dark energy is spread across the universe in a generally uniform and constant manner, although minor disturbances similar to currents and eddies have been documented. These naturally occurring anomalies are still poorly understood but are thought to be attributed to the influence of the mass and gravitational fields of celestial bodies.

When massive stars undergo a supernova there is typically a gravitational collapse followed by a rebounding effect. This rapid gravitational fluctuation combined with the energy released during

the supernova allows for the Slipstream to be disturbed and the boundaries between it's eleven dimensions and the Euclidean four to be blurred. All solid matter near the epicenter has a high probability of being transformed into a transitional element. Commonly referred to as Element Zero, this material exists in the standard Euclidean dimensions but retains a link to the Slipstream.

Direct application of a current of energy causes Element Zero to reactivate the bridge between the dimensions. This allows for dark energy to be extracted from the Slipstream where it can be used to manipulate the Euclidean dimensions. The application of a positive or negative electrical current creates dark energy fields that increase or decrease the the mass of all objects within the field, respectively. These fields can be manipulated in size and strength directly through power of the electrical current applied. This is known as the Mass Effect and it is the key to advances in the modern era of the galaxy.

Unfortunately Element Zero and the Mass Effect have their limitations and drawbacks. Element Zero is exceedingly rare, making the supply dwarfed by the demand across the galaxy. It is found primarily in debris surrounding degenerate stars like pulsars and neutron stars. The extraction of such concentrations requires extensive infrastructure costing large sums of credits to work around the intense radiation of a degenerate star. Remote mining at a safe distance from the star involves building and maintaining a telemetry network for telepresence to monitor and assist VI controlled mining robots and transport vessels. These networks, robots and vessels are subjected to such punishing conditions that their expected lifetime duration is greatly reduced thus drastically increasing the already absurdly high costs of Element Zero.

Occasionally deposits are found when Element Zero laden debris is ejected from it's parent system by supernova and later captured by another system as an asteroid or impacts another celestial body leaving a crater. Thessia represents such a planet with Element Zero impact craters. These deposits are relatively easy to extract but are few and far between, with the size of the nodes being very small. As a percentage of the supply of Element Zero sold on all galactic market less than ten percent comes from such deposits, with Omega asteroid representing nearly seventy five percent of that total.

Element zero is documented to have varying levels of toxicity to different species, although exposure to the public is limited to refined dust form and in such small doses as to be negligible. In higher concentrations it can either facilitate the phenomenon known as biotics or create a rapidly expanding and unstable cancer with a high mortality rate. For this reason alone only qualified personnel should ever perform maintenance on a device or vehicle containing Element Zero.

The limit of electrical current that can be passed through Element Zero also presents an obstacle, as the size and power of a Mass Effect field is dependent upon the strength of the current. The larger the concentration of Element Zero in the device, the more electrical current which can be applied, and therefore the more powerful the Mass Effect field. This typically means only devices capable of housing a large Element Zero concentration, or Core, can

generate fields of significance. This leads to the consistently high prices for weapons, medical equipment, sky vehicles, orbital shuttles, industrial fabricators, spaceships, advanced robotics, military grade vehicles, scientific tools, interstellar communications and high strength construction materials.

The final, and most serious, detriment is the unstable nature inherent with Element Zero. It's ability to manipulated the Slipstream to draw forth dark energy in Mass Effect fields is a residual byproduct from a supernova. It's usage requires a high level of skill, expertise and respect for the power being wielded. As the size and power of a Mass Effect field grows, so to does the risk for catastrophic failure. The operation of faster than light travel requires fields so powerful that the vessels can not safely remain within the Euclidean dimensions and must enter the Slipstream. Attempting to generate fields of that magnitude without the assistance of a translight engine is a disaster waiting to happen. Similarly, a sudden surge or drop in the current being applied to a large Mass Effect field can lead to anomalies with devastating effect not unlike the gravitational collapse of a dying star.

Curiously, scientific models on the formation and stellar cycles of the galaxy show it could have never of naturally produced enough Element Zero that is currently used in the collective Mass Relay network. This has lead to speculative theories that the Protheans had discovered alternative sources of Element Zero, were capable of transit to other galaxies where the Element Zero there could be harvested, or, more radically, had developed a method of producing the precious material artificially. While scientists scoff at the notion of synthetic creation and focused their efforts on determining if the first two solutions were possible this has not stopped entrepreneurs from bankrolling a pursuit of the modern day philosopher's stone.

Because of their power the Slipstream and Element Zero shape galactic policy and lifestyle at every twist and turn. The galactic civilization could not exist nor function the way it does without the knowledge of how to use either but care and respect but be priority one when doing so. In the right hands it brings the marvels of the galaxy to your fingertips but in the wrong hands it can bring about destruction and ruin with ease.

* * *

><p>Codex Entry: Asari

The Asari, scientific name Thilykos Psukhikos, are a monogendered species hailing from the planet Thessia in the Parnitha system, Athena Nebula. Famed for being the founders of the Citadel Council and their excellence in intellectual, diplomatic and cultural pursuits, to say there would be no galactic civilization without them is a stretch but only barely. Their influence is seen and felt in every aspect of Council space and beyond making them the preeminent species of the galaxy.

The species exhibits the amazing parallels of sapient evolution, made even more peculiar in their resemblance to females of several species despite lacking two genders. Body structure is slightly smaller in stature but still comparable to other species. The endoskeletal structure containing high levels of cartilage, decreasing weight and

increasing flexibility. The average asari is physically weaker than other species but far more quick and agile. The skin is made of fine scales and ranging in coloration from light blues to deeper purples, with facial and body markings taking on a pink or white hue. A crest of semi rigid cartilage sweeps across the crown and back of the head. They display a high level of tolerance to Element Zero making them the only sapient species to develop biotics naturally. This can be attributed to the adaptations such as robust cellular regeneration to combat the effects of Element Zero toxicity and a unique bioelectric extrasensory method of communication that enhances natural biotic ability.

The asari are among the most long lived species in the galaxy, averaging nearly a millennium with modern medical science. Their natural ability to ward off senescence gives distinct four stages to an asari lifetime, with the first being the Minor and involving the first twenty years of life from infancy through puberty. The asari child has little to no control over their extrasensory or biotic abilities.

The next is the Maiden stage, exhibited by the end of puberty, control of abilities and the onset of behavior that compels them to explore and partake in as many new experiences as possible. This leads to the stereotypical portrayal of the species as hedonistic. This stage may continue for several centuries as the relatively young asari searches for a desired mate and community.

The third is the Matron stage, brought about when the asari melds repeatedly with an individual or if she begins to lose her wanderlust and settles down in a community. A Matron is very experienced from centuries lived, with many holding multiple proficiencies in various fields.

The fourth and final is the Matriarch stage, which occurs when the asari has exited her childbearing years. Matriarchs are always placed in positions of great authority and valued for their wisdom. As a seemingly unspoken rule, all Asari representatives to the Council have been Matriarchs.

Asari mating, extrasensory ability and natural biotics are deeply interlinked. Their ancestors were a colonial marine creature which depended upon physical interaction for communication and reproduction. The species conveyed basic thoughts and concepts through touch and bioelectrical pulses. These exceptional abilities would provide the foundation for their mastery of biotics, which relies upon extensive control of the nervous system.

Asari are capable of mating with any sentient species with a sufficiently advanced nervous system. The melding process, known culturally as embracing eternity, links the nervous systems through bioelectrical pulses. After several meldings an asari will gain an understanding of her chosen mate's genetic template. She then uses it to randomize her own always resulting in a single asari child despite the species of the father. This does not mean that asari abstain from engaging in or enjoying recreational sexual intimacy. Only that it will not result in conception unless melding occurs frequently.

To maximize diversity this has lead to the custom of seeking out mates of different species. Indeed, the pairing of two asari for creating offspring seems to be rare and almost taboo. An asari may

take on many mates in her lifetime although this should not be confused with promiscuity. Due to their long lifespans and their choice in mates, they often outlive them and may find another after grieving the loss. At most the average asari will have no more than three offspring in her lifetime. There are some counter culture elements that adhere to racial purity, although these enclaves are small, typically frowned upon in asari society and live in secluded regions of asari controlled space.

Asari society is built around their communal nature and lifespans. Population density is very low and spread across several colony worlds. Education teaches basic levels and then allows asari to use centuries lived to learn higher disciplines at their leisure. This longevity allows for the accumulation of knowledge and wealth, leading to a dominance in the galactic economy. As such their preferred method of galactic warfare is cultural and economic. They tend to take the long view, willing to let schemes and plans run the course of decades or even centuries while their enemies scramble for short term victories. The primary asari religion is Siari, a pantheon belief fusing several elements of ancient asari religions with modern spiritualism based upon their ability to mate with any species and natural biotic nature. The ancient goddess Athame figures heavily into this religion as the source of these gifts.

The primary areas of asari focus of the asari economy and technology are law, investing in new technologies, scientific study of all manner, and licensing proprietary technology. Asari are intuitive and revolutionary in their application of Mass Effect fields and associated technology, making their vehicles, FTL systems and bioamps the finest in the galaxy outside the Covenant. The universities on asari worlds are run by guilds that offer tuition in their discipline and apprenticeship in affiliated corporations upon graduation. Many asari choose to study abroad at least once, relishing the chance to assimilate to foreign cultures and learn from the perspective of different species.

Their government consists of direct democratic voting on most issues and public servants in local and regional authority. There is very little concentrated government power in asari society with colonies being under self governance away from Thessia. The real power comes from individual councils, corporations and guilds with Matriarchs shaping public policy for all asari. This structure can be too decentralized and even frustrating for allied races to deal with. Asari diplomacy shines as they strive to maintain excellent relations with their allies and business partners. Since the asari were the first to discover the Citadel and were a founding member of the Council, much of the function and law pertaining reflect asari societal structure. The districts and ward arms of the Citadel bear asari names and the default language of many services and VIs is Thessian.

The Asari Commandos are considered the most elite military force in the galaxy, honing their craft over several centuries. Various conflicts have revealed that although exceptionally skilled and augmented by incredible biotic talent, the asari still have little chance of winning in a conventional war. Their skill sets and low numbers are more suited for anti terrorism and special forces operations. The decentralized manner of governance creates a lack of unified military force with regional and municipal authorities funding paramilitary forces equipped and trained according to the

tasks necessary. Some may field small squads while others create large units still there exists heavy dependence upon VI controlled mechs and other allied species for defense.

Provided they retain their seat on the Council there is little chance the asari will be dethroned anytime soon as the dominant species of the galaxy. What does trouble the galaxy is just what manner of games and schemes the asari might be planning currently which will not come into fruition for several hundred years.

* * *

><p>Codex Entry: Biotics

Biotics is the catch all term for the individuals, sciences and activities revolving around the biologically created and induced manipulations of dark energy found in several sentient species across the galaxy. Typically the manipulation of a Mass Effect field is a mechanical process requiring an element zero core, power source and transmitter to project and shape the field. With biotics the element zero is refined dust form that has fused with the nervous system or analogue. The power source is the bioelectrical energy generated by the organism. The transmitter is the mind and nervous system or analogue which is used to shape and project the field.

The occurrence and frequency of biotics varies by species, with Element Zero toxicity playing a major role. The level of exposure to Element Zero a species must endure in order to generate biotic individuals borders on the toxic level. The asari are the only documented case of a sapient species having naturally occurring biotic ability. Other sapient species display varying levels of biotic potential but on average the ratio of biotic individuals per population is exceedingly low with some species incapable of producing biotic individuals. Biotic potential has been documented in asari, batarians, drell, humans, jiralhanae, salarians, sangheili, turians and volus.

The typical method for biotic manifestation is exposure to refined dust form Element Zero. The prevalent use of Mass Effect fields makes the risk of exposure is very high, although the price of Element Zero combined with it's toxicity ensures that safety precautions are in place to prevent exposure and waste of the precious material. Additionally, most devices sold to the public for personal use contain small amounts of Element Zero, so small that even if exposed the toxicity levels are not enough to warrant concern, nor influence biotic potential.

Researchers in biology and genetics are still unsure why Element Zero has a peculiar reaction with the nervous system of specific species. The general consensus is that genetic markers and possibly chemical composition mark an individual as more receptive to biotic potential, but results are inconclusive. In all species with biotic potential it is expressed when a gestating individual is exposed but in some species the potential can be achieved prior to the individual reaching a pubescent stage. For the asari this is done through the expectant mother or young child living on Thessia or by eating meals consisting of native Thessian organisms high in Element Zero content. For non asari, this is done via exposure to Element Zero at toxic levels. This happens from the mishandling of Element Zero, eating Thessian organisms regularly, or accidents where high levels of the

material are exposed.

The risks run for non asari increase as the toxicity threshold is reached or exceeded, typically resulting in terminal cancerous growths. For this reason alone any attempts to encourage biotic potential is highly illegal. The Citadel Charter classifies it as a war crime akin to chemical and biological warfare. Still, accidents happen and foolish individuals hoping to beat the odds will always tempt fate. These events are always investigated and prosecuted by the Citadel Council to prevent the foolish idea of creating biotic individuals at the expense of so many others.

In the rare event that a non asari individual manifests biotic potential, the Council mandates that local government identify and train the individual in the control of their gifts. The fear being that a biotic individual is a danger to themselves and the public if not properly trained. Because of such fears and the small numbers of non asari biotics there exists bigotry towards biotics in many societies.

Biotic potential in an individual is assessed by the presence of small nodules throughout the nervous system. These growths envelope clusters of Element Zero, fusing it to the nervous system. Ancient asari learned that even with extensive training that biotic ability was taxing, difficult and not very powerful. As they developed sciences they discovered that the nervous system of a biotic was inefficient and never quite synced properly to generate the appropriate focus and energy levels. This lead to the development of the cybernetic implant known as a bioamp. The bioamp is a species specific series of devices surgically implanted at specific points of the nervous system. A master implant is placed at the base of the neck which houses a VI controlled module attuned to the individual that assists in synchronizing and maximizing biotic potential. The VI module can be exchanged for an updated version provided it is compatible with the implant system. If not, then a costly overhaul is necessary requiring surgery to remove the old system and replace it with a newer generation model. Because the initial implantation process is usually done for free or at extreme discount courtesy of their government, many biotics never bother to update to newer models at their own expense, choosing instead to simply update the VI module.

The three limitations to biotic ability are power, training and imagination. Power limits just how much a biotic can achieve as their nervous system can only produce or handle so much bioelectrical energy at any given time. Additionally, their Element Zero nodules are very small, placing a limit on how much energy can be passed through them to power a Mass Effect field. The final component of power limitation is the taxing effect it has on the body. Even the most robust biotic specimens such as Krogan or Sangheili exhibit limited ability to consistently use their biotics in a short period of time. Persistent usage in a small time frame will lead to extreme exhaustion, potential nerve damage and possible aneurysms or comas.

With training, a young biotic learns not only how their body functions in regards to manipulating dark energy, but also how that dark energy affects the world around them. Species operate academies where young biotics are educated but this technique has been largely criticized because often the biotic has no choice in attending and

often pressed into military service. In rare circumstances, individual mentoring is possible if the government has a program for approving such arrangements. The asari method used by all species is to educate the biotic in basic physics alongside a regimen of diet, nutrition and exercise. Self control to prevent unwanted outbursts of dark energy is reinforced with the process gradually moving on to teaching basic biotic techniques for manipulating dark energy.

Imagination plays a huge role in biotic potential, and it's limitations. The biotic's control extends to just how well they can focus their ability on a desired effect. The study of biotic potential, primarily as a combat tool, is considered akin to a martial art, requiring years of study and perfection. Most biotics are familiar with basic techniques such as creating fields to increase or decrease mass. Advanced techniques, such as creating a temporary singularity, erecting a barrier of dark energy or traversing through the Slipstream, are well beyond the grasp of all but masters of biotics. Even worse, the slightest mistake while performing advanced biotic techniques is potentially dangerous to the biotic and allies.

Because biotics are rare outside of asari the public rarely encounters or knows they are encountering a biotic individual unless they use their gifts. This reinforces the fearful and bigoted perception as the primary way the public encounters biotics using their gifts is through media reports on the violent escapades of biotic criminals, biotic mercenaries, biotic soldiers and biotic terrorists.

6. Violence Is Never The Answer?

****AN: **Standard disclaimer. This fic is massively AU and will combine elements from Halo and Mass Effect into one continuity. No separate galaxies. No parallel universe travelers. I have tweaked aspects to fit them together and taken plenty of creative license.******

******This chapter is a continuation of the issues revolving around young Shepard. I want to stress that he is only a teenager right now and not going to be perfect. Much of his journey will be self discovery that turns him into the man he will become later on. Still even that man will possess flaws and make mistakes. ******

******I also should stress that as this is done via first person, you are only getting Shepard's side on issues. That was done deliberately to leave the motives and musings of other characters in mystery until they voice or act on them. You're just as clueless as Shepard is, and your perception to issues will be colored by his own thoughts and personality.******

* * *

><p>Sargasso, Bekenstein, Boltzmann System, Serpent Nebula; March 7th, 2572 [Standardized Terran Calendar], 0843 [Local Time, Terran Standard]

Heated water sprayed on my head and shoulders, creating soothing cascades down my back and chest. I leaned forward and closed my eyes

absorbing the marvelous effects it had for my sore and aching muscles which had seen so much abuse as of late. Basketball practice, football practice, and swimming in the sea on top of a daily exercise routine which had been drilled into my head by Matron Malegos. Ever since she had learned of the behavior Ari and I engaged in she had increased the physical component to our biotic training. An odd but brutal asari mixture of calisthenics and yoga like stretching made more punishing in the early morning Bekenstein heat.

I tapped on the haptic controls to increase the heat of the water, raising it to the point where my skin flushed. Opening my eyes I raised my left arm to practice the ambidextrous drills the Matron had been introducing into our biotic education. I'd yet to become proficient in just one, but she stressed it was important to have a handful on mnemonic devices to obtain the same biotic result. Not the least of which was being able to perform an ability with either hand. In theory, one could train themselves to be able to create biotic effects with no movement at all, but this required years of extensive training and body control, something bordering on the level of the mystical.

A few casual upward flicks of my left hand at the wrist yielded small tingles but no aura and no mass effect fields being raised. I closed my eyes again and let the feel of the steaming hot water bring me into a hypnotic trance, breathing slowly in a steady rhythm through my nose. I tried again to no avail, only a tingle and slight jolt.

Frowning and growling deep in my throat, I tried again, this time feeling the surge of my biotics fully engage. The steaming water of the shower stopped flowing and floated all around me. Giving myself an experimental push off and my feet lifted slowly off the hard tiles as a sense of weightlessness enveloped me. I kept my eyes closed, focused on maintaining the field of lowered mass and remembering the sensation, the neural pathways used to create this effect with my left hand. Once the strain started to become too much, I began easing off the power I was feeding into the field. It seemed excruciatingly long since my body was already taxed from today's lessons and I had to fight to focus through my internal urging to just release.

Once I felt my toes touch down, I let go of the field and the breath I had seemingly been holding forever. Water splashed down all around me, bouncing off the tiled floor and glass enclosure of the shower stall. Once again the shower streamed it's hot rain down on me, and once again I leaned forward, my arms resting on the tiled surface of the wall as I caught my breath behind a satisfied grin.

I proceeded to lather up as I contemplated how I would spend the day and still manage to avoid interaction with my relatives. It was childish, I know, but the polite questioning over my college plans, or lack thereof, had morphed into less than subtle reminders that I needed to make a decision soon. My grandfather's running gag of wanting to turn my room into an art studio was becoming more and more pronounced as the months inched towards June. He'd gone so far as to purchase a stack of canvases that were currently in a storage room downstairs next to the skycar garage. Every time I passed by I was reminded of my impending doom. A Machiavellian life lesson, I suppose.

Breathing deeply, I held my head under the spray to rinse the shampoo

and soap from my hair and body. It wasn't that I wanted to be a bum or layabout, I just had no desire to attend college.

Actually, that wasn't true. I just had no clue what I wanted to major in. What I wanted to do for the rest of my life. I didn't want to take my grandparent's credits to spend a year or two 'finding myself'. That might actually be worse than if I managed to stick around here after I graduated from the academy.

Everyone had their ideas and bits of advice. My Abuela and Tio Julian had suggested an extended trip through Council space. See the wonders of the galaxy like I had dreamed of as a kid. Experience culture and art on homeworlds and major colonies. My Tia Alicia had the grand idea of apprenticing with biotics instructors so that I might become an instructor myself, even going so far as to offer a room at her family condo in the Presidium of the Citadel while I studied.

Lizzy and Abuelo, of course, were still on the same track. Go to college. Get a degree. Don't be a fuck up. Live up to the family name.

The only thing everyone could agree upon was that both Ari and myself were rather sheltered. We grew up on Mindoir, with it's small outer colony lifestyle, tucked away from most sectors of civilized space. Now we were on Bekenstein, in the affluent province of Sargasso. Not another home for kilometers in any direction. No roads and no traffic, we were technically even more isolated from society. It might do us some good to get out into the galaxy to grow up a bit.

Finishing up I turned the shower off and grabbed a towel from the nearby rack to dry myself. Movement in the corner of my eye caught my attention causing me to focus on the distraction. Instead of some intrusion into the bathroom I came face to face with my own reflection.

Lowering the towel I took a good look at myself in all my supposed glory. I wasn't like my father, a small mountain of muscle and strength. I wasn't sinewy and lean like my Abuela, Tio, and cousin Sahan. My Abuela, Mom, Tia, sisters and cousin Linda were tall and graceful. Me? I was a mismatched hodgepodge. I was taller than most everyone in the family save my father and I had his wide shoulders, big hands, large feet and his ears. My face was more like my grandfather, and I had inherited his dark chocolate brown eyes and inky black wavy mess of hair as well. I was athletic with a fair amount of toned muscle. I definitely got enough exercise from all sports I played but my frame seemed larger than I needed. I could only hope I grew into it.

Frowning at myself, I sighed and shook my head. It was no wonder I couldn't get a date. I was definitely awkward looking. And if I didn't figure what I wanted to do with my life soon, I was going to become a burden on my family as well.

Sighing with that uplifting thought process in place I dressed and cleaned up my mess. I opened the door to see Ari lingering in the hallway with her own towel and supplies. She shoved past me in a rush to take her own shower, "You took long enough, dumbass."

Shaking my head at her behavior, I wondered why she hadn't just gone

and used one of the other showers in the house. My annoyance spiked further with jealousy since I knew she was scrambling to get ready to go out with friends. Ari had the uncanny ability and extroverted personality to make friends wherever she went while I was an outcast. It wasn't her fault for my own problems but at times I had to really struggle to repress my envy. Still, she could be a brat at times and I had no problem with pointing that out. "I love you too, Ari. Have fun with all your little goober friends."

Okay, maybe I was being bitter.

After making a detour to my room, I headed downstairs to find a book to read. Maybe watch a biotiball or ricochet game on the big display downstairs, provided I could manage to evade my grandparents long enough to watch it. Wasn't there an EUCC match between the top ranked teams today? Or was that tomorrow? Anything was better than sitting around in my room and playing with my omnitool. I'd pretty much given up on finding anything useful or entertaining on the local cache for Bekenstein and the shows on the extranet channels were garbage. Really, who wanted to hear eighteen different panels discussing the funding for the CDEM or negotiations to rehabilitate Tuchanka or Rakhana? Or what scandal that I could not honestly care less about some random member of the Ashland family was involved in?

Upon reaching the ground floor I flopped down on my favorite sofa and activated my omnitool. The holo display on the far side of the room activated, creating a huge vid projection across the wall with today's schedule and events ready for viewing.

Using my omnitool to scroll through the choices I couldn't find the EUCC match but there was an American rules football match that was live. The Tehran Palangs and Caracas Botos.

Making my selection the stream buffered and then went live... to halftime. Cursing my luck I was about to change the selection when I saw the halftime team gleefully reviewing a pretty spectacular play which was being replayed on the screen.

"And right there, you can see Truong gets her shoulder right under Roggeveen's left arm. Just really levels him."

The crew, all former players given how large and overly muscular they were, nodded and appreciated the hit which leveled both players. One of them voiced their appraisal, "Yeah I hit a guy like that back in '61. I can completely understand how she fractured her collarbone and separated her shoulder on a play like that."

His colleague chuckled and chimed in, "Yeah but didn't you put Orlov down for like a week or two?"

He smiled back at his colleague and nodded, correcting her slightly "Two weeks. Made them lose their spot in the playoffs."

Their reminiscing about the good old days came to a halt as a sideline reporter chimed in with an updated report, "Good news all around. After having her injuries stabilized and treated the Botos expect Truong to be back for the second half. The Palangs have announced that they have stopped the internal bleeding and Roggeveen's condition has been upgraded from critical to stable condition. He's gone for today's game but they're confident he'll be

ready for next week's game against the Springboks in Cape Town. Back to you in the studio, Indrani."

The mentioned presenter nodded and concluded the discussion, "Thanks for the update, Kaveh. That's what you like to hear. Good clean hard plays that everyone can walk away from. Now we're going to take a break with a word from one of today's sponsors, Tupari."

I groaned as my omnitool lit up and pinged, a clear sign that the stream had scanned my identitag before loading a targeted ad. A bright yellow screen with garishly colored cans of Tupari drinks appeared with horrendous Wards style EDM blasting and an obnoxiously loud and enthusiastic voice shouting over it.

"_Greetings, Luis Vincent Shepard! You look thirsty! Care to try a new Tupari Lite? From the makers of Tupari and Tupari Charged! It's packed with essential nutrients and minerals that your levo-based physiology needs!" _

Vids of very attractive and scantily clad women appeared and began dancing around with each other to the throbbing bassline of the music. Most of them were humans but there were a few asari and drell. And I think one of them was a quarian, but that had to be completely digital. No way a quarian would risk illness just so they could be paid to strip down and recorded dancing for an ad.

I think.

Catching myself staring I shook my head and remembered this was just a vid. Still, without the whole bodysuit, quarians were kinda cute. Or at least this one was. That is if you go for the whole purple xeno elven thing. Taking a glance down to her legs, however, was more than a bit of a turn off. And those feet were super weird.

"_Your identitag states you are a human male nearing prime reproductive age! You'll need to be in top form to attract females for endless nights of mating pleasure! New Tupari Lite helps you sustain stamina while providing a cool refreshing taste of foods that will remind you of Earth! New Tupari Lite comes in Kalamari, Krysa, and Ko'a flavors!"_

My eyebrows rose incredulously at the idea of this being serious. Not that I knew much about sex besides what the super awkward vids from school taught but I did know there were better supplements than some Salarian energy drink. Come to think of it, didn't the Salarians have zero sex drive? How the hell did they figure their drink made everyone else aroused?

I was dumbfounded again as the vid of the very attractive quarian in question cracked open a can and took a drink before winking suggestively at me.

Okay, now I really hope this is a simulation otherwise that cute quarian is probably dead from ingesting stuff that species with healthy immune systems considered barely edible.

"_But that's not all! You can share a Tupari Lite with your turian and quarian friends! That's right! Tupari Lite is safe for both levo and dextro based physiologies! Just see here!"_

The ad cut away to a vid of a krogan in a lab. He looked apprehensively at someone off screen, dubiously voicing his concerns. "And I'm getting paid for this right, pyjack?"

There was someone muffled, probably edited out, talking off screen. The krogan was seemingly satisfied and cracked open the can of Tupari Lite. "Let's do this."

I watched in morbid fascination as he swallowed the entire thing in one swig and slammed the empty can down. Giving the person off screen a very dissatisfied look he gestured to the can, "Is it supposed to taste like that? It's like drinking stewed varren droppings."

More mumbling off screen was followed by the krogan becoming perturbed and insulted, "Don't bother about how I know what stewed varren droppings taste like. Where's the credits, pyjack?" The krogan paused and put a hand to his stomach, leaning over slightly and belching loudly. He looked up, bewildered and began moaning, "Am I supposed to feel it in both stomachs?"

Now completely terrified the vid cut back to the holos of the women dancing to the loud music while the voice finished it's sales pitch followed by a rapid disclaimer, _"Tupari Lite! It packs a wallop so strong even a krogan is knocked back! You want to impress your peers and prospective mates, Luis Vincent Shepard? Grab a Tupari Lite right now! Legal Notice: Cimaroon Beverage Company is not responsible if you consume more than is suggested; Scan a can for nutritional data relevant to your medical info; Cimaroon Beverage Company is not responsible for infections and possible deaths caused by sharing a beverage with a quarian."_

Yeah now I was positive that quarian was dead. And for reasons that only my teenage metabolism could fathom, that oddly segued into my being hungry now.

Heading towards the kitchen to find something to munch on I paused hearing my grandparents talking with my uncle. When did he get here? I wasn't in the shower that long, despite what Ari might say to the contrary.

Creeping forward I could see they were seated in the kitchen area, talking in hushed tones which naturally made my inquisitive teenage mind want to know more.

My Abuela was the first to notice my entrance, smiling at me like she hadn't seen me for days. Such a bad poker face. How was she a lawyer? "Are you hungry? It looked like your tutor really worked the two of you hard today."

"Too hard if you ask me." My Abuelo leaned back in his chair and grumbled. Although he abided by the necessity of the lessons he hardly approved. It's not that he a bigot like Bisabuela Elvira, he just didn't like having to pay someone who gave orders around his house. Matron Malegos had no qualms with making remarks about the insufficiency of the home for training biotic children. Weather permitting, and even on occasions when it wasn't, we were training outside or in one of the conservatories. I'd say it was with some spiritual need to connect with nature but I think the Matron had a relatively low opinion of humans. Or at least the ones in this household. And who could blame her after Bisabuela's behavior? But

credits were credits, a universal truth even my Abuelo understood. "I keep telling you Vivian, she wants to turn Araceli into one of those huntresses."

My Abuela rolled her eyes at her husband, tired of having this argument with her mother and husband. She fixed him with an unamused glare while giving a subtle shake of her head, "And I keep telling you that a little exercise and discipline never hurt any child." She pursed her lips and looked at her son, Julian. "I wish there had been a tutor like that for the three of you when you were children. Would have saved me lots of headaches."

If my Tio was affronted in the slightest he didn't show it. Instead he grinned and sipped his drink, ngon juice from what I could tell. Ngon was an orange colored tuber like plant that could be eaten as is or roasted but was often pressed into a juice that was packed with nutrients and minerals, making it exceptionally healthy for any levo based life forms.

It also one of the few edible foods produced by the ecosystem of Sur'Kesh that didn't look like it had been defecated or smelled like it had rotted.

Which pretty much explained that Tupari ad now that I think about it.

Ignoring the question in favor of letting them continue to talk amongst themselves, I opted to check the fridge for something to eat in addition of a drink. Let's see... hmmmmm. A banana. Some water. Leftover kebabs. Roast asparagus. Potato gratin. And there was still some ngon juice. Perfectly healthy meal for a ravenous teenage male.

I quickly made a plate for myself and perched it atop my two glasses, expertly moving towards the small kitchen table everyone was sitting at. Taking a seat I noticed their conversation had died. Looking up from my plate I noticed I had become a spectacle for everyone. Abuelo had an amused smile on his face while Tio Julian and Abuela wore looks of slight revulsion. Becoming self conscious of my meal I double checked to see if anything was wrong and found nothing. Shrugging I tore into the first skewer, removing a piece of lamb and popping it into my mouth.

Abuela Vivian's face became even more contorted in disgust as she looked away, shaking her head. "You don't want to at least warm that up?" At my grunting a negative response, she sighed and was about to continue the conversation from before when the vid display in the den blared loudly announcing the start of the second half.

Realizing I had forgotten about leaving it on I smiled around my mouthful of food in apology. I quickly deactivated the vid display remotely through my omnitool and resumed eating my meal. Abuela rolled her eyes at my antics and looked to my Uncle, "I'm still not sure what it is you want from us, mijo."

Julian tore his eyes away from my demolishing of the food on my plate to address his mother, "Friends. Acquaintances. Anyone from Bekenstein or even outside that you think would be interested in supporting the cause."

"And therein lies the problem." My Abuelo didn't seem convinced of whatever it was Tio Julian was talking about, but given what I knew of his job it probably was throwing a fundraiser party for some business or political party. Leaning forward, he played with an empty glass in his left hand before staring my uncle down, "We both know this isn't for anything you're claiming it to be and I have a sneaking suspicion of who this really is for."

Julian leaned back and folded his arms, defensive but defiant. He coolly responded to his father's insinuation, "And we both know you've never had a problem with supporting them in the past. Why the change of heart?"

"It doesn't take a genius to realize they've gone rogue. Even this man you have hosting the party, Hock. He's Terminus trash. A pinche pendejo that thinks if he donates credits to art museums that people will forget he runs military grade equipment to insurrectionists. And then they sell it off to the same type of bastards that killed your sister." I'd rarely seen my Abuelo this fiery in a discussion with anyone. Usually it took direct insults or threats to bring this side out of him but never had I seen it directed at a family member.

The mention of my mother and the types that killed her grabbed my attention, which my Abuela immediately noticed. Before either of us could get a word in, my grandfather continued his tirade, pointing a finger at my uncle. "You're mixed up with the wrong types. They talk a good game and say all the right things. Defense of the human race. Human superiority. But they're bottom feeders who prey upon their own people for a few credits. If you don't smarten up, you're going to be labeled with the same brush."

"Perhaps this isn't a conversation we should be having now." My Abuela intervened before father and son could get further in their argument, eager to settle tempers before someone said something they regretted. I also got the idea she didn't want me to understand what my Abuelo Hector meant by 'the same bastards that killed your sister.'

I was proven right when my grandfather rebuked her, "Absolutely not, Vivian. Luis needs to learn about the harsh realities of the galaxy." He stared me down as if I had been the one to offend him, causing me to pause in my eating but gaining my full attention. "What happened to your mother is the result of a pissing match the Hegemony and Systems Alliance have been engaging in for decades." He turned to glare at my uncle, who didn't flinch or back down from glaring in return, "And your Tio seems to think supporting the bastards that profit by playing both sides is a good idea."

To say I was shocked would be an understatement. There had to be a misunderstanding. Maybe my Abuelo was being hyperbolic, exaggerating my uncle's involvement. I mean, he couldn't be supporting the same people that aided in my mother, his sister's death? Could he?

Whatever calm and cool demeanor he had held during this conversation disintegrated at the claim, causing him to lash out in frustration and anger at my grandfather, "That's not even remotely true and you know it!" He took a deep breath and leaned back in his seat staring out the window onto the green fields surrounding the house. For a moment it was quiet as everyone seemed at a loss of how to continue

the conversation at hand. For my part I plopped off an onion from the skewer and set it aside, reaching for the mushroom that was next in line. I wasn't particularly fond of onions. Alright, that's a lie. I hated them. Flesh of Satan, in my honest opinion. I didn't understand the obsession with putting them into just about every meal. Nevertheless, I had become adept at picking them out of my food and putting them off to the side. It had become such a habit that even in my emotionally confused state I did it without thinking.

The moment had given my Tio enough time to gain his composure and think his way through what he wanted to say. Licking his lips, he finally made eye contact with my grandfather, who had never stopped glaring at him, "They do the job that the UNSC and Systems Alliance are too scared to perform for fear of upsetting our alien overlords. Do you think the Council has our best interests at heart?" He leaned forward again, hoping to make his point more vivid with his audience, "They didn't after Harvest because the Covenant scares them. They only negotiated with us after Shanxi because we scared them. And that is the lesson learned. They're cowards that don't care about anything but themselves."

My Abuelo stared at his son for a moment before grunting, clearly unconvinced. "Thank you for the history lesson, Julian. Now let me inform you about what you can only dream about knowing." He leaned forward to match his son's posture as he condescended towards him, "Better men than you have delivered that speech to me in far better ways. The old crowd lived up to their motto and goals. This new bunch, the ones that have shown up since Harvest ended? They're self serving dogs that associate with the lowest rungs of the galaxy to achieve their goals. Little better than insurrectionists. Until I see a change I will not give them another credit. And I can assure you, I'm not the only one."

My Tio snarled, ready to deliver a nasty retort when my Abeula cleared her throat and pointedly looked at her son and husband. His reply died in his throat as he nodded and leaned back, observing his father with disgust. After another moment of the staring contest, he shook his head and acquiesced, "Of course, father. Leave it to the reactionaries on Arcturus, right?"

"That is enough! Both of you!" If my mother's trademarked bark had been fearsome, then she learned it from her mother, who sounded like she could make krogans weak kneed. In fact, so many of my mother's mannerisms were apparent in my Abuela's current stance. The pinching of the bridge of her nose and drumming of her fingernails on the table. The squared shoulders and tensed posture. The same quirked lips and eye roll. It was uncanny and a little impressive to see how three generations of women in my family mirrored each other. Ari and Lizzy had so many of the same traits and all of them meant the same thing. I'm pissed and you're not going to like what follows.

It would seem the other men at the table knew the warning signs of an impending explosion and carefully withdrew from their battlefield before a vastly superior opponent arrived. I'm not sure if it was recklessness or my own curiosity that got the best of me, but I disregarded the threat in order to ask, "Who are these people you're talking about?"

I was partly annoyed and partly amused by the reaction my question garnered. Both my uncle and grandfather tensed and looked away,

obviously fearing my Abuela enough to avoid answering. I was on the receiving end of a death glare that made me wilt and look down at the two empty skewers on my plate. I grabbed my fork and dug into the gratin and asparagus. Out of the corner of my eye I saw my Abuela shake her head, the auburn waves shaking side to side as she leaned forward to massage her temples.

After another awkward moment of silence, aside from my chewing, my Tio drained his glass of juice and stood, beaming at his mother. "Unfortunately, I have to cut this visit short. I still have business to attend to on Milgrom before I head back to the Citadel tonight."

My Abuela stood as well and embraced her son in a hug, squeezing him tight and giving him a kiss on the cheek. He gave a short laugh and kissed her back before slapping me on the shoulder. "It was good to see you again, sobrino. Tell your sister I said bye, okay?" I nodded around a mouthful of food while he looked down at me with a smirk. Taking a quick glance at my plate and glasses, his smirk widened as he winked at me. "Maybe learn some table manners while you're at it, eh? Couldn't hurt with getting girls. You're a young human male entering his sexual prime after all." He laugh and slapped me on the shoulder again.

I slowed my chewing and looked bewildered between my grandparents, who each wore looks of exasperation but in different ways. Did they know that vid ad had been on?

Abuelo and Tio Julian stared at each other for a moment before my grandfather looked away, disgusted with his son. Julian nodded once and walked out of the kitchen, no doubt headed for the stairwell that lead to the underground garage.

My grandmother stared at her husband for a moment before mumbling something under her breath and pickup up plates and glasses to put into the dishwasher. I protested, not wanting to be a burden, but she waved me off, grabbing my empties, clearly wanting something to do to vent her annoyance. After loading the dirty utensils and dishes, she turned to face the two of us, attempting to attain some normalcy in the house. "I'm taking Araceli to a friend's house for a slumber party so it will just be the three of us tonight. Any ideas for a meal?"

Tearing away himself away from glaring at the grass outside, Abuelo turned and smiled at his wife and slapped his belly. "Something light. That lamb from last night is still sitting like a rock in my stomach."

She frowned, wrinkling her nose, a slight smile on her lips. "How charming, Hector. Salad and soup sound good then?"

I nodded and offered to help, "I can start that up while you're out. What am I making?" Even if my offer was genuine, it had an ulterior motive, as did all my offers to help make food. If I controlled the ingredients I could prevent onions from being put in.

Opening the fridge, she observed the contents while clicking her tongue. Satisfied with what she found, she pulled out some corn, squash and red peppers. "Bean soup. Get them out of the pantry and some chicken broth. I can make the salad when I get back."

I walked to the pantry and retrieved the items, carrying them to the island counter where we usually prepared meals. Placing them down next to the veggies I noticed the addition of another unwelcome vegetable. An onion. I looked up to see my Abuela sauntering out of the kitchen towards the stairs. Reaching them she looked at me, then the onion, and winked before trotting upstairs to check on Ari.

Damn it. I frowned at the onion like it was something that I found offensive, which it really was. This day just gets better and better. I sighed and pulled out the cutting board, knives and pot to begin preparing the meal.

Turning on his omnitool, my grandfather began reading reports from the Sirta Foundation that wanted his input and expertise on efforts to find a cure to Kepral's Syndrome, some disease drell contracted. He flicked his fingers and the report displayed a holo of alien DNA, showing several different attempts to cure the disease. Leaning on his right elbow, he became engrossed in the display, his mouth silently wording equations and solutions as he mindlessly played with the hair on his chin.

Seeing him at work it was easy to understand how he had managed to build the fortune he had. The man was a genius when it came to genetics and became engrossed when presented with new problems or projects. A large portion of the top tier genetic augmentation packages that were only legal for UNSC special forces to receive were created and patented by the man sitting at the kitchen table.

I was so distracted watching him that I neglected to pay attention to the heavy cutting blade in my hands, easily slicing into my left index finger. I winced and pulled my hand away, not wanting to get blood all over the food. Dropping the blade I squeezed my hand and reached for the first aid kit under the sink. Ripping it open I found a few sterilizing pads and heavy gauze bandages but those were not necessary as the wound, despite it's heavy blood flow, was relatively minor. A package of small red and white tubes the size of my fingertip containing a dose of medigel was exactly what I needed.

Holding the tip with my teeth, I twisted with my right hand and the cap popped off, remaining between my teeth. Aiming the small nozzle at my cut, I gently squeezed the oozing translucent yellow gel out evenly. I braced myself for the ensuing searing hot sting and residual warming effect, hissing through my teeth as the wound sealed itself with the quasi organic substance. Over the next several hours the compounds within the medigel would replicate my genetic structure to recreate the tissue that was damaged or destroyed by my injury, leaving a perfectly flawless healing that only failed to reproduce environmental factors like suntans or tattoos.

Washing my hands to remove excess medigel and blood I then cleaned up my mess, throwing the empty medigel container into the biodegradable waste disposal unit. Returning to the island counter, I was relieved to see I had not gotten any blood on the food or cutting board. The knife itself only required a quick wash and rinsing, but I need to move fast as I had lost some time as the water in the pot was still warming to a boil.

Looking over at my grandfather he didn't seem to have noticed my

accident, or had already dismissed it. I contemplated the idea of asking him to clarify on his earlier statement now that my grandmother wasn't present but decided to wait until I was sure she had left with Ari. Setting back to my task of chopping vegetables I made a steady rhythm of cutting and tossing into the pot, although I might have gained some satisfaction from mutilating the onion first.

A thundering of footfalls let me know Ari was coming down the stairs. A bag slung over her shoulder and her omnitool activated, she rushed into the kitchen and tackled Abuelo in his seat with a hug before giving him a kiss, "Okay, bye. I'll see you tomorrow." Just as quickly she charged right back out of the room, past my Abuela who was coming down the stairs at a more sedate pace, shaking her head at her granddaughter's antics.

"I'll be back in a few. Try not to burn down the house while I'm gone boys." Abuela waved and followed after Ari who had already stormed downstairs and was probably waiting impatiently next to her skycar.

Abuelo Hector recovered from the sudden impact that was Araceli and began chuckling, shaking his head and calling after his wife, "No promises, carino. But you be careful that little one doesn't run you out of the sky."

My grandmother's laughter could be heard yelling back, "I'll be fine. The dangerous one in a skycar is in the kitchen with you, amor." I paused at the insinuation and glared in her general direction but that only caused my Abuelo to laugh louder.

Sure, laugh it up, old man.

As his mirth, and my annoyance, to died down, I decided now would be the best time to bring up the topic from earlier. But it would seem he was of the same mind, but for entirely different reasons. Looking up from the display emitting from his omnitool, my Abuelo stared at me once again with seriousness, asking "Have you given anymore thought to what university you're going to attend?"

I sighed and stared at the cutting board and knife. Of course he would want to talk about that instead. Fuck my life.

* * *

><p>Sargasso, Bekenstein, Boltzmann System, Serpent Nebula; April 22nd, 2572 [Standardized Terran Calendar], 0916 [Local Time, Terran Standard]

I repeatedly tapped a stylus against a datapad in boredom. I'd finished the assignment for today in my calculus course but the Mordehai Polytechnic Preparatory Academy, despite it's prestigious name, catered to the spawn of the Sargasso elite. Now I'm not saying my fellow classmates were idiots, but most of them were not going to be revolutionizing the galaxy in academics. Well, to be honest neither was I, but they were the children of the wealthy and their enrollment in the best universities humanity had to offer was guaranteed.

So that was how I found myself in this class on a Wednesday, a little

over a week past my eighteenth birthday. Bored out of my mind and resisting the urge to put my head down my desk to sleep. Some fucking rugby jock that fancied himself a renaissance man was slowing down the class asking inane questions that had already been covered. Again. I didn't feel the slightest bit guilty over being rude towards the guy since, to put it bluntly, Pavlo Tarasuk was an asshole.

A soft sigh to my left brought me out of my funk. Wajiha Sellami was a dazzling young woman and practically nobility. Her father came from a lineage of wealthy prospectors that dated back to the early days of the interstellar colonization efforts and her mother was one of the many heirs to the modern day royal family of humanity, the Ashlands. I had to make it a habit not to be a creep and stare at her bronze skin or silky straight onyx tresses whenever we shared classes. Though right now she seemed to be as bored as I was, staring out of the window at the nearby coastal town of La Garza, her beautiful face in a pout as she rested her chin in her left hand.

Feeling my stare upon her, she turned and looked in my direction. I forced myself not to panic or act weird by commiserating with smile and shrug. Although I'm sure I came across as being disturbed and possibly constipated.

To my surprise she smiled back and rolled her eyes in a playful way.

My mind froze and I tried desperately to avoid looking as shocked as I felt. Her reaction was to giggle softly and wink at me before playing with her omnitool. A moment later my own omnitool pinged a message notification and I quickly silenced it, flustered as the professor and my classmates all turned to stare at the disturbance.

Once the attention had died down, I covertly linked omnitool to my datapad and read the message.

[\\ Wajiha N Sellami [A] Sarg Bekenstein [to] Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein \\]

[\\ Doing anything this weekend? :) \\]

Resisting the urge to look at her in disbelief and point to myself comically for clarification, my slightly shaking fingers typed out a reply.

[\\ Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein[to] Wajiha N Sellami [A] Sarg Bekenstein \\]

[\\ I have a tutor on Sundays but other than that I don't do much. Maybe go swimming. \\]

She turned to me and eyed the back of my neck, smirking before responding.

[\\ Wajiha N Sellami [A] Sarg Bekenstein [to] Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein \\]

[\\ I don't really go swimming down in the Teves much but I do have a bikini I am dying to try out. Maybe we could hang out? I've heard there are extra special things a biotic guy can do. I'm interested in

finding out. \]

It took every ounce of self control I had not to blurt out anything inappropriate. This wasn't really happening. I had to be dreaming. What had really happened was that I had lost the battle to fall asleep in class and any second now I was going to be rudely awoken and laughed at.

Wajiha continued to stare down at her datapad but glanced at me out of the corner of her eye before slowly raising her eyebrows.

Holy shit. This was real and she was waiting on my reply.

Contemplating my response I figured it would be best to be as truthful as possible. It would be insanely embarrassing if I talked myself up only to be unable to deliver.

[\ Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein[to] Wajiha N Sellami [A] Sarg Bekenstein \]

[\ My tutor doesn't exactly teach those kind of things. Thankfully. It'd be super awkward to have to practice those with her, or even worse, my younger sister. \]

She frowned and tilted her head to the side, obviously less than pleased with my answer. Before my mind could panic that I had said the wrong thing a smile slowly blossomed on her face and she typed out her response.

[\ Wajiha N Sellami [A] Sarg Bekenstein [to] Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein \]

[\ Then I guess we can experiment together? I'm sure I can teach you a few tricks. \]

My pulse was starting to race and I had to slightly readjust myself because I was starting to have a physical reaction to her flirting. Still, I needed to make her keenly aware how dangerous it was for me, a relative novice with biotics, to practice new techniques on another person.

[\ Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein[to] Wajiha N Sellami [A] Sarg Bekenstein \]

[\ I'm not really supposed to be playing with my biotics like that. It could be dangerous. I don't want to hurt you. \]

I waited nervously as she read my latest message. She looked at me with hooded eyes, a devious smirk on her lips.

[\ Wajiha N Sellami [A] Sarg Bekenstein [to] Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein \]

[\ Trying to say you're dangerous? I might like that, a lot. So are you willing, biotic bad boy? \]

Moment of truth. My heart was thundering in my chest and my hands had become a sweaty and shaking mess. I made sure to catch her attention before nodding slowly. Her smile brightened and she nodded once to

herself.

Feeling inordinately pleased with myself, I blew out a sigh of relief and looked around the room, unable to suppress the grin growing on my face. Everyone in the class appeared to have been oblivious to what just happened which, oddly enough, only made me giddier.

Well, everyone except Pavlo, who was looking between Wajiha and myself with a dour expression.

Locking eyes with me his frown became a hard scowl which made me slightly nervous. He wasn't dating, Wajiha, was he? I didn't bother to keep track of the relationships at the academy since they seemed to change by the week. Maybe he wanted to date her?

I felt a surge of territorial pride overcome me, urging me to glare back and defend myself and my interests. She may not be my girlfriend, but she had shown interest in me and I would be damned if I was going to be scared off by some jealous jackass.

He seemed genuinely shocked at my reciprocated scowl. Most people didn't have the nerve to piss him off. Hell, I normally wouldn't have the nerve to piss him off but I was feeling particularly fearless at the moment. Once the shock had worn off, Pavlo looked livid, mumbling threats under his breath in my direction.

Ignoring him became easy when I looked back at Wajiha, who would look at me periodically and smile, boosting my ego nonstop. In what seemed like no time at all, the class was over and everyone was grabbing their belongings to head to their next course. I had a basic physics class next on the other side of the campus so I needed to hurry, having around ten minutes to get there through the throng of my fellow classmates.

Waving at Wajiha, who was still putting her datapad into her bag, I headed off. Exiting into the hallway I was immediately forced to fight my way through the chaos of teenagers walking in every direction, not looking where they were going and generally being clueless to their surroundings. Tightening the hold I had on the school bag slung over my shoulder, I pushed through a pair of girls, stopped and walked around another, and cut across a conversation of guys near the staircase. Going with the flow of students descending, my omnitool pinged again, and I brought it up, eagerly wondering if Wajiha had sent me another message.

[\ Pavlo R Tarasuk [A] Sarg Bekenstein [to] Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein \]

[\ Look up, motherfucker. \]

Look up? I looked around in a slight panic, realizing I had not been paying attention to my surroundings and I might have wandered into some sort of trap. Seeing nothing but other kids moving to and from their classes I calmed until a shrill whistle pierced the stairwell. Everyone turned to look in it's direction, near the top of the steps, where Pavlo was standing holding a rugby football in his hands, his omnitool still activated.

My mind froze and I had a flashback to that batarian on Mindoir. Balak. Rushing from the treeline of our orchards at me with his rifle

raised. Fear seized my mind as I began vividly recalling my mother's lifeless body staring into the distance.

A split second later my head was rocked back and my lips and nose burst with a searing pain as something smashed into my face. I stumbled backwards, awkwardly grabbing anything I could but everyone jumped out of my way, allowing me to fall backwards down the last few steps. I heard more than felt the smack of my head against the tile of the stairwell and my datapad being broken against my back. Again I was recalling the dazed feeling and panic of being knocked on my back that day on Mindoir. The gasps and laughter of my classmates being drowned out by the memory the batarian I had killed barking orders at me, aiming that harpoon rifle, the Kishock, at my head. The high ceiling of the stairwell morphing from it's grey tones to the blue skies of Mindoir.

Slowly the muddled imagery in my mind faded and the haze of emotions dulled, allowing me to sit up and feel my face. My back and tailbone throbbed from where I had fallen and my head felt fuzzy like it had for a few days after Mindoir. My lips were unnaturally warm and sticky and I taste the bitter copper flavor of blood in my mouth. Groping upwards I touched my nose and recoiled as it was tender to the touch and bleeding freely. Looking down I could see the front of my green shirt had several crimson stains of blood on it. To my right the weapon of my attack, Pavlo's rugby football, lay not unlike the final harpoon the batarian had fired.

Shouting got my attention as I saw Wajiha in an argument with Pavlo, who looked smug over his actions. He noticed my stare and called down to me, chuckling to himself "I told you to look up, Mindy."

I snarled and stood quickly. My mind had snapped and overpowering rage consumed me. I wasn't going to let him get away with this. Not with trying to intimidate me. Not with attacking me. Not with making fun of the fact I was from Mindoir. No one was going to push me around or threaten me again.

Warm tears, partly from my nose injury and partly from the raging tsunami of emotions building inside of me wet the corners of my eyes. I shook and practically vibrated in place, fists clenching at my sides.

"Oh, what are you going to do, tough guy? Cry?" Pavlo continued to mock me, feeding the burning rage I had inside. His eyes, so much like that batarian's main set. Mocking me. Daring me. "You think you're so badass because you survived some pirate attack. I bet you hid and cried the whole time while your family was killed, you fucking coward."

That was what lit the fuse. It was as simple as that. The mention of my parent's death was all it took. Without thinking I had charged up the stairs ready to deliver a wild punch to his smug fucking face. Pavlo braced himself and swung a leg forward in a stomping motion as I neared, aiming for my chest.

My mind operated on autopilot and I dodged to the right and focused on summoning an unstable mass effect field around my right fist. In that split second I saw everyone recoil, eyes wide as they were illuminated in the purple glow of my aura. Pavlo's face melted as he realized what was happening, going from cocky and self assured to

confused and finally to terrified but it was too late. The fury that had been bottled up in me for so long was out and unleashing it's wrath upon him. I almost felt like a spectator as I watched my fist crashed into the left side of his face, the unstable energy expelling outwards in a miniature nova that sent him flying sideways into the nearby wall.

And then it was over just as quick as it had started. He slumped, his head lolling like a rag doll before he slowly fell forward, coming to a rest in a sort of fetal position. My earlier surge of vindictive desire faded as I realized what I had done.

I might have just killed someone.

My mind began spinning, desperately trying to rationalize my actions while a small voice in the back of my head reminded me that I had technically already killed that batarian. Swallowing the lump in my throat I saw my classmates all backing away from me like I was going to attack them next. Wajiha stared at me wide eyed and fearful. When I made eye contact with me she blanched, and took a quick step away from me, looking anywhere but in my direction. My stomach dropped and I began to feel shame and fear creeping in. I had done something terribly wrong and I was going to pay dearly for it.

* * *

><p>Sargasso, Bekenstein, Boltzmann System, Serpent Nebula; April 22nd, 2572 [Standardized Terran Calendar], 1922 [Local Time, Terran Standard]

"Are you just going to sit there and not say anything?" Livid wasn't how I would describe my Abuelo at this point. He had passed that a while ago. They might have to invent a new word for how upset he was. In some ways, he became even more focused and intense as his aggressive anger reached new heights. So I wasn't in any risk of being hit with anything but then again he also realized the entire situation revolved around my being attacked by a classmate earlier today. Probably a good idea to divorce violence altogether from the equation.

Pavlo was alive, thankfully, and going to make a full recovery. That was the good news. Unfortunately, I had dislocated and broken his jaw as well as smashed his cheek bone, He had a pretty nasty concussion and couldn't remember what had happened the entire morning which naturally led to my being blamed for the entire incident. At that point I had proclaimed my innocence, relatively speaking, and offered my omnitool and the eyewitness accounts of every student in the hallway and stairwell as evidence.

Once my accounting of the story had been established, the faculty wanted to know what had led to the altercation. Offering my omnitool earlier turned out to be a big mistake. By the time my grandparents arrived, Wajiha and her parents plus Pavlo's parents were all amassed to hear the gory details as the exchange of flirty and suggestive messages were read. I squirmed in my seat as I could feel the eyes of my Abuela burning into the side of my skull.

Wajiha was humiliated to the point of tears as her parents stared in shock at their daughter's obvious attempt to set up a sexual rendezvous. I also had the impression they were less than thrilled it

was with a biotic. My grandparents were just as dumbfounded to realize the entire fiasco had evolved from a pair of teenagers exhibiting their hormonal urges to mate like wild animals. Pavlo's parents were incensed, proclaiming that their child had been dragged into the web of two deviant children but proof their little angel put himself smack in the middle shut them up rather quickly. Still it was pretty easy to see where he got his sense of entitlement from.

My Abuelo nearly had to restrain my Abuela when she learned the asshole had mocked the death of her daughter and son in law.

In the end the entire event was swept under the rug as MTrans and the CAA would not be informed of my usage of biotics. Pavlo's parent's were forced to withdraw their charges of assault in exchange for my grandparents not pursuing an assault charge against Pavlo. Everyone would pay for their own medical treatment and the academy would do their best to keep the two of us separated for the remainder of the school year.

I had suffered a broken nose and busted upper lip as well as a fractured metacarpal from the punch, all of which were treated at the local hospital in La Garza and would be healed within a week. What wouldn't go away in a week was the fact that my classmates, Wajiha included, were terrified of the unstable biotic farm kid from Mindoir now. And given my grandparent's reactions, my punishments were going to have a very lasting effect.

Abuelo stopped in his pacing and glared at me, drawing my attention to the halt in his movements. My grandmother sat on a sofa across the room, arms crossed and a frown on her face as she studied me. They both expected me to respond and not sulk but I knew the second I opened my mouth I would be ripped into no matter what I said. In fact, the combination of anger and dull throbbing pain from my head caused me to feel more and more defiant by the second. I didn't want to kill Pavlo but I also didn't feel the slightest bit guilty over paying him back for attacking me.

Openly challenging my grandfather, I met his eyes and asked, "What do you want me to say?"

"Sorry might be a start, you insolent bastard." Abuelo lashed out at me, just as I expected. Sorry? I wasn't sorry. Pavlo attacked me. He ran his mouth. I responded. He lost. End of discussion. Did he want me to be some meek coward and accept punishment and abuse from others? Or was he more worried about the societal implications of my actions? That others in Sargasso might talk about the biotic kid from Mindoir? Too late there, Abuelo. That's what started this in the first place.

Abuela Vivian stood immediately and got in her husband's face, shoving him back slightly away from me. She was furious at the both of us but was incensed to hear her husband call their grandson a bastard. "That is enough!" Abuelo Hector shook his head and stalked away, obviously upset but recognizing the fact he was losing his cool.

Being the smart ass teenager I was and given the emotional turmoil I was feeling, once again my mouth moved faster than my brain could keep up with. "Mom and Dad were married when they had me but your favorite, Lizzy, is an actual bastard."

It was a low blow to throw Lizzy into the mix like that but given her attitude since our parents died I wasn't happy with her either. I was tired of everyone picking on me. The stress and pestering and mocking because I didn't belong here or know what I wanted to do with my life and all I wanted to do was go home to Mindoir.

I had emphasized the word Dad to less than subtlety point out my knowing of what was happening in the house. The my father's memory was being torn to shreds. Sure, he wasn't perfect, but he didn't deserve the way they were treating him in death. Just like I didn't deserve it now.

Upon seeing my grandparent's shocked and angry expressions at my cruel remark I had a sensation of satisfaction. Enough to bring about a sarcastic addition, just to twist my grandfather's request from earlier in his face. I leaned back into the couch and smiled mockingly, shrugging and crossing my arms for added effect, "Sorry."

Abuelo's face took on a more red hue as he stomped towards me, hands raised and clenched like he wanted to punch me. I stood and prepared myself for a fight but before we got within arms reach of each other my grandmother shoved my shoulders, knocking me back into the sofa and waved a finger in my face, her expression almost demonic. "Watch your tongue, Luis. You're in enough trouble as it is without dragging others in." She whipped around to face her husband, still lecturing and gesturing, "And you. Unless you can discuss things without yelling or name calling then I suggest you leave the room."

He stared at her, just as shocked as I was at her forceful commanding of the situation. He looked even more enraged but was impotent in the face of his wife's firm stance and reminder, "I am not playing with you, Hector. You're not thinking this through rationally. This is your flesh and blood."

"And you still coddle him. He nearly killed a student, Vivian." He deflated, confused and betrayed by his wife. Staring at me over her shoulder with a critical eye for a moment, Abuelo shook his head and reaffirmed what I had known all along. "He's his father's son. Tainted. An aimless waste not worthy of our family. Nothing more and nothing less."

The rage I felt earlier in the stairwell blossomed yet again. I wasn't going to stand by and allow anyone to bully me or my father's memory. Not even my own grandfather. I jumped to my feet again, feeling my biotic aura flare on it's own and light the dimly lit room. I instinctively knew I had to control myself not to lash out with my fists or biotics. Instead I settled for yelling, my nose and lips throbbing. "Fuck you!"

I had to give him credit, Abuelo didn't even flinch. In fact, he took a step forward, daring me to strike out. Bellowing at the top of his lungs, he established his dominance in his own home "You're going to attack me too?" Gesturing with a wave of his arm at me, Abuelo turned to his wife and let his final thoughts on the matter be known. "He is gone from my house by this weekend, Vivian. I am not sheltering a wild beast like this under my roof. If you insist, you can keep it outside in one of the conservatories. Maybe it can farm the land there like the ass it seeks to emulate."

With that said he stormed out of the living room, not sparing a look back at either of us. My Abuela sagged and held her face in her hands, a heavy shuddering sigh rocking her shoulders. In the low light of the room she looked so much like her daughter, my mother and it made me feel conflicted over my recent actions. Not that I regretted them, but I didn't like the effect they had on her. My aura faded, leaving me dizzy and weak. The exhaustion, injuries and rapidly fluctuating emotions of the day were catching up to me.

She noticed the change in lighting and turned to look at me, wiping her eyes with a single hand before pinching the bridge of her nose and sighing. She gave a single monotone command, "Sit." When I didn't immediately comply, she dropped her hand from her face and stared at me, her eyes hard and devoid of warmth. "Now. You don't want everyone in this family being your enemy."

I dropped back into the sofa I always used, turning my head and staring out at the moonlight play across the waves of the Teves Sea. Crossing my arms and sighing, I filled the empty void of silence in the room, "I'm sick and tired of him saying things like that about my father."

Abuela Vivian seemed her age as she shuffled to the sofa opposite the one I occupied and sat on the edge. She stared at me for a moment, her own anger barely constrained in her gaze. When she finally spoke it was in a tone that made me shrink back in on myself in shame. "You swore to me that you would never use your biotics to harm another person. Do you remember that?"

Guilt gnawed at the rage within, cutting it down to size in no time at all. I couldn't look at her, knowing I had broken that promise. It had been subconscious, and even righteous, to use my biotics but not once had I given thought to remembering her request.

We sat there in silence for a while longer until she spoke again, this time not really acknowledging me. "You're so much like your father. Hector never approved of Albert. Hannah was his little girl and no one would ever be good enough for her and I think your father knew that. Hector could never deny her anything, though, and she always got what she wanted despite my protests otherwise. He spoiled her at times and I think he regrets that now. He feels guilt for her decisions that lead to her death. I think he fears seeing that in Ari and yourself"

I was transfixed at her seemingly non sequitur into family history but still didn't see the point. Abuelo was an asshole who hated my father and now wanted to take that hate out on me. Was she trying to defend him for his actions and treatment? "It still doesn't make it right."

She stared at me for a moment, actually digesting my presence. I could feel myself being measured by lawyer Vivian and found wanting. She slightly tilted her head to the side and spoke slowly, calmly "Maybe your grandfather was right. I am coddling you because you should know by now that nothing in life is fair or right." I felt a bit embarrassed at her statement. Abuela's gift in life was a way to say things and make you feel foolish but never angry with her. A truly motherly method of correcting you and having you almost want to beg for her forgiveness. Almost. She sagged and shook her head,

frowning as she further observed me, "You really haven't adjusted to everything that happened and coming to live here, have you?"

"Just noticing that right now?" I was angry, but it wasn't with her. It was my own fault for running my mouth when she was making the effort to talk to me and find out what was wrong. I knew I was being a pain in the ass but this hurt. I didn't want to talk about it and I knew why. I could feel my eyes watering no matter how much I glared out the window and tried to summon anger and hate to dry them.

If Abuela was hurt by my comment she didn't show it. Instead she seemed more concerned and curious, demanding to be let in or have me open up. "You're never this rude or angry. What happened today?"

I squeezed my eyes shut, allowing a few tracks of tears to form on my cheeks. It was painful to think of how twisted the day had become. I had been riding an emotional high, possibly having someone interested in me only to have it crash into a burning wreckage of epic proportions. Clearing my throat I answered her around my tears, "You heard it earlier. I flirted with a girl and then that asshole attacked me."

"Being older I have seen my share of flirtation. There was hardly any flirting happening, I can assure you." Abuela drawled and sat back in her seat, folding her hands on her lap as she regarded me. "That girl was using you to find out what sex with a biotic would feel like. And that boy, Pavlo? What did he call you?"

A new wave of depression and shame washed over me at Abuela's statement. Of course she was right. Wajiha had never shown interest in me before today but suddenly she wanted to have sex with me? That was something out of a bad porno vid and my hormone addled teenage mind had refused to accept the obvious. That was a painful truth to acknowledge. I wasn't appealing to her, my biotics were. In fact, she might have been willing to have sex with me for my biotics despite my appeal, or lack thereof.

And my nickname? Mindy? Most everyone called me that because it was easier to remember than actually talking or getting to know me. But to be honest with myself, I wasn't exactly jumping at every chance to get to know my peers here in Sargasso either. Mumbling my answer, since I couldn't face her, too ashamed at how pathetic I really was. "Mindy."

Abuela frowned, clearly understanding the meaning, not just of the name but of the reasoning for saddling me with such a name. "As in Mindoir?" At my nod, she blew a loud breath out through her nose before digging in deeper, "And how long have the other students called you that?"

I shrugged, not at all interested in continuing this conversation. I knew I wasn't anything special but I didn't want to dwell on it. Abuela Vivian had other thoughts on the matter, making an observation that sparked my anger yet again. "Your sister doesn't have these problems..." She trailed off, noticing the visible fury her words created, the clenching of my fists and staring out the window with renewed hatred.

"And that's it, isn't it?" She seemed even more despondent than anything, seeing through my armor of vitriol and anger. She stood and

crossed the distance between us, sitting next to me and taking my right hand. She leaned in, waiting for me turn to look at her. When I refused she reached out to grasp my chin gently and slowly turned my head so our teary eyes met. "Mijo, you're not inferior to your sisters. Is that what you think?"

The dam burst and a jumble of words and melancholy poured from me. "Everyone keeps telling me to be like Lizzy." I swallowed around a hiccup as I tried, futilely, to not sob. "And Ari makes friends and fits in no matter where she goes. I'm the loser dumbass of the family. Like my father."

She wrapped her arms around me and hugged me, holding me close as I tried to swallow my tears. "You are like your father." I flinched in her arms, pulling away but her arms tightened their hold as she continued, "But you're not him. When you were all young, your mother would vid chat with me all the time since we never had the opportunity to visit each other. She would ask for advice about the same thing you're going through. Your father never believed in himself. Always thought the worst. Afraid to try because he automatically assumed he would fail. And that is what destroyed their marriage."

I sat there for a moment, breathing in the scent of her hair and processing what she had said. It sounded plausible but I was still at a lost of what it all meant. I hated this feeling of being so weak and pathetic but I had no idea how to go about correcting it. "What am I supposed to do?" I winced as my voice sounded tiny, like a child's. This was embarrassing and I desperately hoped Ari wasn't listening in on this. Or worse, recording it.

Releasing me from her loving embrace, she grabbed my shoulders in her hands and held me at arms length. Smiling, Abuela spoke with optimism and confidence, obviously attempting to infuse me with her strength. "The same thing that I told all my children growing up. The same thing I told your mother to repeat to your father. Stop trying to be someone else or someone that others think you should be. Be yourself and find what makes you happy."

I thought about that for a moment. What made me happy? I didn't know. I couldn't even decide what I wanted to go to school for. I pleaded for clarity, still not sure what to do "But I don't know what that means. That's why I don't want to go to college."

Abuela reached out to run her fingers through my hair, lightly scratching my scalp but never losing her poise. She maintained her positive stance and buoyed my spirits, as confused as I was. "And that's fine. Your life isn't over because you're not following someone's schedule for success and happiness. If you do that then you'll only be following that person's path in life. Remember, be yourself. There are people my age who still haven't figured this out." She chuckled and looked off in the direction her husband went. "Your grandfather knows this, his own life isn't as neat and orderly as he likes to portray. He's been a maverick and walked off the beaten path many times but has the tendency to forget that when dealing with others." She looked back at me and rubbed my shoulders, "You have plenty of time to make brilliant decisions and recover from stupid mistakes, mijo. Just don't stop trying, that's all I ask of you."

It amazed me how she could still be so caring and concerned despite everything I had done today. I still wasn't sure she was correct about me being able to make something of myself, but it felt amazing to know that someone believed in me. This time, I initiated the hug as I squeezed her tight, murmuring softly in her ear. "Thank you, Abuela." My voice hitched as my sobs began anew. "I'm sorry."

Her body relaxed, as if she knew she had achieved one of her goals tonight. She rocked us both gently as she soothed me, "I know you are, mijo." Teasing me she pulled back and grinned "See? There's something you have that your sister's don't. Humility and empathy. Those will serve you well in life." She leaned forward and kissed my forehead before releasing me to stand up. Activating her omnitool, she checked the time and grimaced before glaring down at me, ominous looking with the dull orange glow on her attractive features. "Head upstairs. I don't want to see you until tomorrow morning. I have a lot of damage control to work through with your grandfather."

I nodded and stood, heading towards the staircase but was stopped when she pulled on my left wrist. Looking back at me, Abuela Vivian made herself abundantly clear about what would happen to me. "You're going to do a lot of groveling and apologizing tomorrow, do you understand?" I nodded quickly, no nonsense Vivian was back in the room. She released my wrist and nodded, her countenance lacking any visible sign of what she had planned for me. "Good, we'll be discussing what sort of repercussions and punishments you have coming your way tomorrow. You broke your promise about using your biotics. Now go. Levantate."

I scurried out of her sight and took the steps three at a time, dodging around the cleaning drone. I paused and frowned in front of my own door as I heard Ari try to stealthily close her own. Staring down the dark hallway towards her room I snarled, feeling violated. She had been listening in. Knowing I should have expected nothing less from her I mumbled pleasant things about nosy sisters and entered my room. Activating my omnitool to provide light I kicked off my shoes and threw myself on my bed, rolling over to stare at the ceiling.

Now that I was laying down I wasn't the least bit tired, in fact I was wide awake with a million things racing through my mind. The foremost being the idea my Abuela had planted in my mind. It didn't matter what others thought or wanted me to do. I needed to find my own place in life and to do that I needed to find what made me happy.

But what was that? And how long would it take to find it? I didn't want to be some bum living at home instead of working or going to school. How was I going to find inspiration between now and the end of the school year?

My mind brought up the one thing that would make me happier than anything else. Leaving this damn place. I was sick and tired of Bekenstein and my family's pressure.

"VI, Bring up the list of potential majors." I voiced my command to my omnitool and a set of forty potential fields of study I had compiled was displayed above in a haptic hologram. I shifted through the links and colleges with the best programs in those fields.

Even with my new found wisdom, nothing was grabbing my attention. No spark. No passion. No guiding light. I was still in the dark, figuratively and literally.

I lay there, the words and images bleeding together as I was not really focusing on what I was reading as I visited university websites. A flashing banner at the bottom of my screen caught my attention. An advertisement for the UNSC.

The United Nations Space Command. Humanity's military force.

Bored and curious I tapped the link and a vid began, displaying holos of soldiers in armor wielding rifles, our warships patrolling star systems and members of the various branches standing proudly in their uniforms. The vid ended with a holo of familiar planets with a slogan for each.

Defend Amaterasu. Defend Arcadia. Defend Bekenstein. Defend Benning. Defend Cygnus. Defend Eden Prime. Defend Elysium. Defend Harvest. Defend Jericho. Defend Mars. Defend Mindoir. Defend Qartaj Jadid. Defend Reach. Defend Shanxi. Defend Shunzhi. Defend Terra Nova. Defend Watson.

It ended with a holo the UNSC logo, a bird of prey with wings extended over Earth and the stylized A of the Systems Alliance in front.

Defend Earth. Defend Humanity.

The vid went black before asking in white block style lettering.

'Would you like to know more?'

I reached out and selected the link.

* * *

><p>Codex Entry: Augmentation

The standard progression of civilization for a sapient species is to develop technologies that master their environments and beyond. It is inevitable that such technologies would be used to master their own bodies. Because methods are varied and specific to the species, and in many cases the individual, the Council and associated governments have strict guidelines on what is acceptable when it comes to augmentation.

Augmentation can be divided into four separate disciplines that have overlap and interaction. Chemical, the enhancement of physiology through the means of introducing pharmaceuticals and synthetic hormones. Cybernetic, the implantation of devices and robotics to replace or supplement existing body structures. Genetic, the altering of DNA to increase baseline efficiency, regenerate organic structures and eliminate hereditary weakness. And extensions, the usage of external equipment that syncs with the body for enhancement.

The chemical method of enhancement is one of the oldest, often mastered by races well before they reach interplanetary or interstellar stages of advancement. The appeal of modern chemical

enhancement is that the effects are precise and often temporary. Since body chemistry differs drastically between species the range and availability of chemical supplements varies. Medicinal variants are the most common, used to cure ailments, speed recovery and limit senescence. Governments classify chemical enhancements based upon their toxicity, dependence, practical use, and potential for misuse. Common types allowed to the public are steroids, stimulants, nootropics, and sedatives. Especially powerful versions with more permanent effects are authorized only for specific professions and only under medical supervision.

Cybernetic enhancement is by far the most widespread and diverse method. The classification is broken down further into three sub classifications of nanotech, bionic, and neural. Nanotech covers nanites and small devices implanted for convenience. Bionic covers synthetic implants that enhance or replace structures within the body. And neural covers devices that interface directly with the nervous system in some manner.

Nanotech consists of several categories of cybernetic implants, mostly divided between medical and interfacing technologies. Nanites are used in medical facilities and emergency medical kits to aid in surgery, infection treatment and health maintenance. Nanotech implants such as haptic sensors allow for the user to interact with haptic holographic technology without gloves. Hearing transmitter implants are used to provide transmission of communications directly to the organ responsible for processing hearing. The identitag implant contains important information such as detailed medical files, financial data and other personal records. Bio medical scanners help to monitor health conditions and can alert authorities if the user is incapable of calling for help in a medical emergency. Soldiers and those in high risk professions are implanted with trauma modules that assist in organizing the body's response to injury as well as coordinating the efforts of nanites.

Citizens in Council space are required to have an identitag and the majority opt to voluntarily receive other nanotech implants making it one of the most susceptible methods to steal information and sabotage another individual. Despite the widespread practice of nanotech, nanite handling is limited to licensed medical professionals and emergency medical kits. The potential for abuse is tremendous as the creation of weaponized or self replicating nanites is a serious offense according to the Citadel Charter.

Bionic implants refers to the replacement of internal organs or limbs with synthetic equivalents. The efficiency and availability of genetically cloned replacements makes synthetic replacement a relative rarity. In the rare case of extensive traumatic injury or the uncommon case of modern medicine being incapable of treating a disease, a synthetic replacement will be considered. Synthetic replacements are capable of performances that exceed even the most engineered organic alternative, but they place a higher level of stress on the body. Common bionic augmentation are: Standard sensory enhancement as well as more exotic features such as electroreception and magnetoreception; Lattice weaves to strengthen bone, muscle and softer external layers; Organ and limb replacement to increase function; and cosmetic implants for exotic illumination, texture, structure and coloration to the skin, hair, plates, eyes, crests, teeth and claws.

The practice of enhancing neural interaction is most associated with other facets of augmentation, primarily to extensions. Neural interfacing implants allow professionals in various fields to link with devices and equipment for telepresence. The practice is found readily in information technology, telecommunications, remote mining, military, piloting, medical, and electronic warfare. Biotic implants are another form of neural implant which enhances the user's nervous system to provide a stronger and more efficient ability to control the gift of dark energy manipulation. A third common form of neural implantation is internal data storage accessible via the user's mind and external devices. More advanced and experimental versions, commonly referred to as grayboxes, are heavily encrypted, hardened to electronic warfare, and is capable of greater information storage and transfer. The prevailing issue with neural implants is the danger in neurological trauma from a faulty or damaged implant which results in brain damage, erratic behavioral issues, and degraded sensory ability.

The Council gives more latitude to associate governments in how they manage and implement genetic treatments. Every species within Council space has laws in place that dictate how genetic research and activity is conducted based upon moral and social concerns, with emphasis on discrimination, enhancement, property and cloning. Examples of these laws are the Systems Alliance's Mortal Dictata, Illuminated Primacy's Enkindler Vision, Turian Hierarchy's Meritus Legatum Act, and Salarian Union's Clan Endowment Laws. These laws prohibit the unauthorized cloning of an individual, give proprietary rights to individuals over their genetic code, prevent individuals or corporations from owning genetic templates to sapient species, and experimentation which might lead to the creation of mutated strains of sentient species.

The usual practice of genetic augmentation is to eliminate hereditary weakness in a species. This is typically expressed in negating diseases, defects, and flaws in the initial developmental phases. Parents are forbidden in Council space from engineering the appearance and capabilities of their offspring beyond approved augmentation packages. This is to avoid infringing upon the rights of the unborn child and avoiding the introduction of potentially dangerous genetic mutations into the population. The second most common form is cloning of organs and limbs to replace those damage or destroyed. This requires strict medical supervision as the cloning of any sapient genetic template without consent of the individual for purposes other than medical is a crime. Another form in which approved genetic mutation occurs is for approved professions, although these augmentation packages merely maximize potential and are forbidden from enhancing individuals beyond normal capabilities of the species.

By any measure, tools of all kinds could be considered an extension, allowing sapients to perform tasks they could not normally do or perform those they can more efficiently. The modern practice of extension technology revolves around the interfacing of the body with equipment to enhance capability. The usage is not invasive but does work in conjunction with other forms of augmentation, primarily cybernetic technology. One of the most common methods of extension augmentation is the piloting of vehicles. By using neural and nanotech implants a user is capable of interfacing with vehicles in a manner that drastically increases reaction time and precision. This technology is seen frequently in attack craft, exoskeletons, and

remote operations requiring telepresence.

Another key area of extension augmentation is undersuits meant for athletic, professional and combat activities. These suits are designed to perform as an unpowered, lightweight and skintight exoskeleton that assists the user in increasing physical capabilities slightly while reducing stress and exertion. More advanced models are considered power armors and feature increased capabilities with additional protection. Like weaponry, the sales and use of basic or advanced model undersuits is for licensed and trained individuals only.

The fields of augmentation are always expanding with new technological breakthroughs but the Council is ever aware of the potential for abuse. While many feel their decisions are too cautious, the wild and largely lawless Terminus is a haven for illegal and experimental modification of all kinds. If one has the credits, connections and desire to travel to unsavory parts of the galaxy, then nearly any augmentation process is possible.

* * *

><p>Codex Entry: BiofoamMedigel**

The twin wonders of Biofoam and Medigel are a relatively recent addition to the galaxy, having been created by humans following the Relay 314 Incident/First Contact War. Credit for their creation goes to Sirta Foundation's Optican subdivision, which had been contracted by the UNSC to create a more effective means to treat injuries on the battlefield under any conditions. The end result was a mixture of general anesthetic, antimicrobial agent, coagulent polymer resin, simple amino acids, and nanite solution.

Medigel and Biofoam differ slightly in composition but their general purpose remains the same. The mixture is applied via injector until it seals the wound. The coagulent polymer resin expands greatly once released from the pressurized injector. With the wound sealed and blood loss halted, the antimicrobial and anesthetic work to cleanse the wound and dull pain. Concurrently with those processes the nanites begin aiding the healing and regenerative process by aiding in assembling the amino acids into cellular structures identical to the user's genetic template.

Despite the illusion of immediate relief and stabilization, the wound itself is not healed instantly. The accelerated regeneration still takes several hours at which point the coagulent polymer resin begins to flake and break away, revealing healthy tissue with minimal to no scarring.

The difference in medigel and biofoam is a matter of severity. Medigel is meant to heal minor flesh wounds and stabilize more severe ones. It is available to the public without a prescription or certification and contained in small injection dispensers. It sees use in households, businesses, and battlefields across the galaxy.

Biofoam, however, is restricted to medical professionals, trained emergency responders, and military forces. The injector is a larger tube with an adjustable and flexible lengthy nozzle. It is designed to stabilize more traumatic injuries, thus the mixture is heavier on

anesthetic and coagulant. The nozzle is inserted into the wound and the pressure release on the tube activated, flooding the wound and body cavity with the mixture to hold organs, tissue, bone and ligaments in place. As biofoam is only used in the most grievous of injuries it is still imperative that further medical treatment is sought for the injured individual as the accelerated regenerative process of biofoam will not be enough to repair the complexity of damage done.

Due to the chirality issues of levo and dextro based species, the Sirta Foundation quickly developed a dextro brand of their products for the turian military and public, although the quarian Migrant Fleet purchases this product as well.

The Council was initially skeptical of allowing the sale of medigel but public pressure allowed the Sirta Foundation to obtain a patent and license for the product in the civilian market. The major concerns were the usage of nanites to clone tissue based upon an individual's genetic template. While it was obvious that the intent of such cloning was far from malicious, the Council did not wish to set precedent. With a minor rewriting of the Citadel Charter it was decreed that the purchase and use of medigel for private emergency use was agreement to temporarily waive your individual proprietary rights to your genetic template and allow cloning to occur without the supervision of a trained professional.

It should be noted that while medigel and biofoam are revolutionary methods to treat injury they are not fool proof nor do they solve every medical emergency. Broken bones, torn tendons, serious infections, heavy blood loss, poisoning, severe burns, and neurological damage will not be treated with any efficiency by either product. It is strongly stressed that if you are afflicted with such injuries or ailments that you alert authorities and seek immediate assistance from a trained medical professional or VI system.

* * *

><p>Codex Entry: Omnitool

Business. Communications. Diagnostics. Education. Entertainment. Finance. Information. Media. Manufacturing. Public Service. Research. Workstation.

These are the myriad of applications for haptic holographic interactive technology, mobile quantum computing power, virtual intelligence and optical data storage intersecting to create the modular instrument known as an omnitool.

The small devices are created by several manufacturers across the galaxy with the same modular design and many third party vendors providing additional hardware and software options. The tool is housed in a standard wristband worn on the non dominant, or offhand, arm. Exotic custom models are built into more extravagant housing like jeweled bracelets, chronometers or clothing. Power is provided via solid oxide fuel cells but can be supplemented with modular solar, wireless, and vibration additions.

Regardless of manufacturer an omnitool functions in four modes: Offhand; Dominant hand; Combination; and Stealth. The user selects the preferred mode for immediate activation as well as quick switch

selections for secondary mode.

The offhand mode creates a haptic interface extending from the wristband to the offhand. This mode of interface is used for simple manual manipulation with the offhand.

The dominant hand mode creates a more complex user interface across the forearm of the offhand. This interface typically incorporates a haptic keyboard or other desired peripheral inputs.

Combination mode incorporates both offhand and dominant hand. This is the preferred method of use for more involved and specialized work without reliance upon VIs.

Stealth mode creates a barely visible haptic holographic interface of the user's preprogrammed choice. The user is typically familiar with the layout of the haptic interface so as to not require visual cues to interact with the device.

Standard in every omnitool are media capture and playback technologies as well as the ability to pair with civilian grade implants and equipment such as identitags, datapads, terminals, kiosks, medical scanners, security checkpoints, earpieces, eye wear, personal vehicles, personal weapons and home appliances. The device will act as a transaction intermediary between a device requesting information from identitags or medical implants allowing for convenient identification, payment and notification services. An omnitool registered to a recognized citizen will be given free access to data networks across Council space and aboard vessels. In exchange these omnitools are monitored and used to quickly dispense information to the public. Access to private or official networks is dependent upon clearance and registering with the entity operating the network. Official language translation packs are preloaded and will activate in a manner of the user's choosing.

The modular design of the omnitool creates a wealth of additional options. Sensory and scientific packages allow for advanced testing and readings. Advanced medical units assist in the diagnosis and treatment of the owner or another. Mini fabrication units produce small and simple objects. Sophisticated VI suites provide a multitude of software options ranging from military to educational to business to even criminal enterprises.

As an omnitool is an incredibly personal device, laws pertaining to the theft, hacking or misuse of an omnitool are harsh. As the name might suggest, an omnitool is truly capable of nearly anything sapient can think of. The flexibility and intimate nature makes an omnitool an extension of the sapient experience, putting the full possibilities of galactic civilization at your haptic implant fingertips.

7. Enlisting Outside Help

****AN: **Standard disclaimer. This fic is massively AU and will combine elements from Halo and Mass Effect into one continuity. No separate galaxies. No parallel universe travelers. I have tweaked aspects to fit them together and taken plenty of creative license.*****

*****Something to take note of is that by merging the two continuities into one that events no longer play as they did before. I've used aspects of both series to fill in gaps in the other and warped the storyline to reflect how a shared continuity would change people, places, and history.*****

*****I can appreciate how this might alienate fans or diehards, but my goal with this fic from the outset was to avoid novelization of the games where we all know what is going to be said or happen next. I also wanted to avoid creating a self insert/wish fulfillment rewrite of canon. I wanted to challenge myself to take these concepts and turn them on their head to create a familiar yet original story that hopefully others find enjoyable.*****

*****Or at least tolerable. Maybe. Probably not.*****

*****So if you enjoy what you're reading, carry on. If not, eh, I tried.*****

* * *

><p>Sargasso, Bekenstein, Boltzmann System, Serpent Nebula; May 18th, 2572 [Standardized Terran Calendar], 0658 [Local Time, Terran Standard]

The early morning air still had a slight chill and the breeze coming off the ocean wasn't helping but the lack of clouds meant it would wear off into a typical warm day before long. Milgrom was further south, nearer the equator, and would probably be much warmer which is why I was dressed in a light shirt and pants. Nothing eye catching that would attract attention as I sat around and waited in this coffee shop in La Garza.

Every person that walked by or entered the shop sent a paranoid thrill through me. I hadn't lied to anyone, per say, when I had told the academy I wasn't going to be attending my classes today. This was in fact a personal issue I was resolving. And I hadn't actually lied to my family, either. I had just neglected to tell them that I would be skipping school to head to Milgrom with a UNSC recruiter. Half truths and omissions to be sure, but this was my decision. Joining the UNSC would give me time and experience to find what it is that made me happy in life. Earn some credits, see the galaxy, become physically fit. The more I thought about it, the more I was sure this was a great idea.

Except the part where I would be getting shot at. Can't forget about that. My palms and the soles of my feet became tingly for millionth time this morning as I nervously debated the sanity of my decision. I hadn't committed to anything yet. I could just tell the recruiter that I was sorry but the UNSC wasn't for me.

I sighed and rested my forehead on my folded arms atop the table I was seated at. An empty cup of hot chocolate and half eaten spinach, egg, tomato and pesto bagel sandwich pushed off to the side since my stomach was tying itself into knots with anxiety, ruining my appetite. My legs bounced up and down, excess energy compelling me to get up and pace around but that really would draw unwanted attention. I knew I was being delusional, but I could swear that every glance my way was someone who knew my grandparents or knew I should be in school right now. Any second I was going to get a notification on my

omnitoool for a message that they knew what I was doing.

Things with my grandparents had been... tense, for the past few weeks. Abuelo had come down off of his threats but had refused to apologize. His attitude was that I was his wife's problem now. He had washed his hands of me and that suited me just fine but it made for some awkward moments in the house. Abuela had been compensating towards me to make up for her husband's behavior, giving me space and encouraging me to ignore my own insecurities. That's not to say I hadn't been punished, which I had, because she was a rather cruel and ingenious taskmaster. I swear I was never going to get on her bad side again. Ari had been enthusiastic once she knew there would be no real danger for my actions. Apparently she knew of Pavlo by reputation and seemed to think her brother crushing the local jackass was something of a badge of honor, which left me feeling oddly proud and embarrassed. And that's not even counting how weirdly Matron Malegos reacted to the news of my altercation at school. Instead of chastising me she had approved of my reaction, stating that she had been waiting for me to stop being afraid of my own shadow.

Either way, I couldn't stay here. Things were becoming unbearable and the sooner I left, the better. I would be graduating in less than a month and hopefully I could be off to training within a week after that.

That is if I could make it through this interview. What if the UNSC didn't want me? Like I had some defect or something? Wait, what had that flag on my medical file meant? I had asked about that when we first came to live with our grandparents but the family doctor they used had never heard of it and apparently it wasn't stored on the medical files in my identitag.

My wild thoughts were cut short as my executioner waltzed by the windows of the shop, clearly taking in the view of La Garza. It was nothing special, a little smaller than Nouveau Basel, mostly because the majority of people lived throughout the province and only came here for shopping and entertainment. The stores were fancier and the clientele richer, but it still was a rather quaint colony town. Which is how the people here liked it otherwise they would be living in the high rises of Milgrom, one of humanity's fastest growing metropolises. Even New Alexandria and Illyria were being outpaced by Milgrom and they had a century or two of a head start.

She was tall and strong looking, with caramel colored skin and closely cropped black hair under her military cap. Her attire was a dark blue uniform adorned with gold trimming and fit her perfectly, making her look every inch the soldier she was. On her chest she had two rows of medals and ribbons, some of which caught the morning light perfectly. On her sleeve were three arrow heads grouped together, chevrons, pointed upwards towards her shoulder with two bars underneath the grouping. We never got UNSC personnel around here so this had to be my recruiter, Sergeant Muhavi.

She stepped in the coffee shop, our agreed upon meeting spot, and removed her cap, looking around for me. I bashfully waved and stood, unsure what would happen next. She nodded and inclined her head towards the counter and proceeded to walk towards the clerk and place an order. I grabbed my trash and belongings and hurriedly fell in step with her. She smiled and joked with the clerk, an older man who owned the business, earning a chuckle from him as he processed her

order. Her omnitool blinked once and chirped, acknowledging the transaction and she turned to extend her hand towards me, her voice smooth and deep. "Shepard? It's good to meet you in the flesh. I'm Staff Sergeant Rebecca Muhavi, UNSC Army."

I reached out to shake her hand and immediately recoiled, feeling my hand was still a bit moist from the paranoid sweating I was doing. Quickly rubbing my palm against my pant leg I reached out and took her hand, which crushed mine in it's grip. She shook it once and let it drop, an amused smile on her face. "Weak grip. No worries. We'll fix that."

"Your order, miss." The clerk handed over a cup of coffee which she gladly took and smelled, a dazed and pleased look coming over her face.

Sergeant Muhavi leaned towards the clerk and winked, a charming smile on her face, "Sergeant will do just fine. No one calls me miss unless they're trying to get in my pants." She sobered and asked, "Speaking of which, you have a restroom around here? It's a long trip to and from Milgrom."

The clerk chuckled, appreciatively giving her body a once over and pointed towards a small hallway behind the counter. "I don't usually let customers use the restroom, but it wouldn't be polite to turn down a soldier. And a lady."

She laughed, giving the clerk a pleased nod and handed her coffee cup to me, her playful manner still in place. "Alright, first job. It's a tough one. Keep my coffee warm and refrain from spitting in it. Think you can handle that?"

I shrugged, not sure if she was being serious or not. She smiled and briskly walked away towards the private restroom, leaving me at the counter awkwardly holding her coffee and the patrons of the store staring at the commotion. The clerk placed his elbows on the counter and leaned in, all smiles and curiosity. "So, UNSC, huh?"

Quirking my lips I processed his question. It was so simple and innocent to him but had huge implications for me. Looking around the store, I could see the effect this strong woman in a uniform had on even the wealthy and self absorbed people of Bekenstein. They were in awe, she was so commanding in her presence but completely at ease with herself. I wanted that feeling. Was that what Abuela meant? Was that what happiness and finding your own path meant?

Slowly a smile took shape on my lips, and I nodded, for once in weeks feeling absolutely sure about my future. So, UNSC, huh? "Yep. UNSC."

"Alright, let's hit the skyway, buddy." Sergeant Muhavi had returned quickly and snatched her coffee out of my hands as she marched past. She waved at the clerk and thanked him for his hospitality and once again I hurried to follow in her wake.

We hit the lanes outside and she began walking at a very brisk pace, almost jogging. She raised the cup to her lips but froze, turning her head slightly to eye me with accusation. "Did you spit in my coffee?"

I almost tripped over my feet at her question. She hadn't been playing. Stammering, I shook my head and replied. "No. I just held it. I... no I didn't spit. In it. I didn't spit in it." After a second I realized it was probably military protocol to refer to her by rank but I wasn't sure, so it sounded more like a question than anything. "Sergeant?"

She laughed, took a sip and smiled at me, never once breaking her stride. "Good save. We'll have you trained and whipped into shape in no time."

Wait. She was playing with me? Or was that a test?

I remained quiet the next two blocks, letting her enjoy her beverage and avoiding another game like the last. We came upon a lot for parking sky vehicles and stepped up to a neon red Mahindra Ratha. I whistled, impressed by her ride. It wasn't anything top of the line but it was one of the best human made skycars at an affordable price. The series also had a following across Council space for being one of the fastest commercial vehicles on the market, only being beat by high end Volus and Asari models that cost twice as much.

She placed her beverage near the rear engine compartment and activated her omnitool, quickly sending the authorization code to unlock the vehicle and security systems. The skycar opened like a clamshell, exposing a black leather interior that was pristine. She grabbed her cup and hopped into the front left hand side seat and quickly buckled herself in. I jogged around the car and took the seat next to her, strapping the belt and shoulder restraints in place. The haptic display activated and she keyed herself in, the VI coming online and closing the passenger compartment. The skycar shook slightly as the engines activated and I felt the ripple of static electricity as the eezo core created a lightened mass effect field to levitate the car and hummed in sync with my own eezo nodules. A synthesized male voice greeted us, "_Welcome back, Sergeant Muhavi. Will you be taking manual control?"_

"Only until we're in the skyway and then you can do your thing." She responded and flicked her hands across the displays, bringing the manual controls up and raising the vehicle. A slight weightless sensation in my stomach was the only sign she'd done anything before we angled upwards and around, Sergeant Muhavi's head on a swivel as she regarded all the controls and sensors while simultaneously looking through the cabin windows for other vehicles.

Once we had cleared the rooftops of the majority of nearby buildings, she leveled us off and we headed towards a small blinking beacon floating on the outskirts of town. Sergeant Muhavi calmly sipped her coffee with her right hand as she used her left hand to gently guide the haptic controls towards our destination. Once we had neared it she put her drink down and brought up the VI again, her order rapid and concise. "VI, plot course for Milgrom, Sector 19. Be expedient. Inform Milgrom UNSC Recruitment Center of our departure and expected arrival time. Link my terminal with my omnitool. Play some light jazz, background volume setting." She pouted for a moment, clearly thinking over her orders before amending them. "Send message to Chief Petty Officer Granger. Message: Don't you dare take my parking spot, swabbie."

"_Orders confirmed. Message sent. Terminal link processing. Milgrom

UNSC Recruitment Center informed. Thelonious Monk, April In Paris. Expected arrival in Milgrom, Sector 19, roughly 58 minutes, Terran Standardized Time."_ She tapped a final control and the VI assumed duties for flying the vehicle, banking to the left before straightening out and accelerating us to nearly five hundred kilometers per hour now that we were in the authorized skylane.

Leaning back in her seat, the sergeant fiddled with her omnitool until she brought up a display that was probably the link to her terminal. She glanced at me and smiled, "Nervous?"

I swallowed and nodded, self conscious of my every movement and expression. I didn't know where to put my hands or how to respond. This was real. I was actually going to do this.

She must have sensed my discomfort because she reached out and patted my shoulder, her smile becoming even more pronounced if not a bit mischievous. "Relax, I'm not going to bite. I'm going to ask some questions while we're headed to Milgrom and fill out the necessary forms. Once we're there, we'll run through some quick tests and screenings. Nothing major. This is all just to get an idea of what you're like."

I took her advice and relaxed, letting the tension I had been holding in out. After a deep breath I nodded, ready to continue. "Okay. Let's do this."

She was still setting up the forms so she made small talk, "I saw the area as I was coming in. Never been here before. Real pretty."

I snorted, rolling my eyes and looking out the side window as the coastline blurred past. "More like real boring."

"Yeah, that was my second thought. What is there to do out here?" her chuckles and confirmation of just how boring Sargasso seemed made me feel even more at ease.

I shrugged as I tried to decipher what she was doing. Maybe if I had a clue what she would be asking I could prepare myself.

Muhavi didn't seem the slightest bit perturbed by my nonanswer or obvious attempt to watch her work. I guess being a recruiter put her into contact daily with people who were curious and apprehensive about the process. "I suppose that's incentive enough to want to get out of here." She frowned and turned to look at me, her own curiosity apparent. "Although, this place doesn't look like the people here are short on credits. Why not go to college first? It would fast track you for OCS."

Slightly annoyed by her question I turned to look out the window. Not her too? What was it with people pushing me towards college? And what the hell was OCS? I looked back, confusion evident "Fast track for what?"

The sergeant looked sheepish and shook her head, giving me a apologetic grin. "Sorry. I'm still new to the job. Only been doing it for a few weeks and I still slip into military jargon like I'm talking with my fellow shitkickers back at the base." She cleared her throat and reassumed her professional demeanor. "Officer Candidate

School. Better pay, better quarters, shiny ranks and you'd get saluted."

I smirked, wondering if that was the official pitch for that school. "Shiny ranks?"

She shrugged, not at all embarrassed by her remark "They lead and people like me follow. But the UNSC wants those with a broader education and higher requirements. Can't have just anyone calling the shots."

Nodding to myself I contemplated the possibility. My Tio Kamal was an officer, I think. His job seemed cushy, no battlefield antics that I could tell. Actually, my Tia Alicia wouldn't stand for it, now that I thought about it. But I was getting ahead of myself here. She just said they wanted people with a college education, and I was joining now. So that ruled out the option from the start, even if it was appealing. Then again, I couldn't exactly picture myself leading anyone. Me? A leader? I had trouble getting my hamster on Mindoir to obey me.

The silence in the cabin stretched on and I felt the need to fill it by answering her earlier question, "Well, I'm not sure college is really for me."

"That happens. Sometimes people need to mature more or spend some time away from education. That's what I did. Went back and got my degrees years later." Muhavi had finished with her setup and focused her full attention on me. Taking a moment to observe her it was easy to take in how she was trying her best to put me at ease while preparing me for this huge decision. Sometimes her smiles seemed forced and other times she was distracted but answered quickly.

That wasn't so surprising when you considered her job was to sell the UNSC to people like me to get us to join, but it left me feeling slightly creeped out. And she never really went into detail about what was going to happen today, leaving me even more concerned. Deciding to broach the topic, I politely asked. "So, how long is this all going to take?"

Smirking at me she tilted her head to the side and teased me "Why? Got some hot date or something?"

Blushing and annoyed at being so easily countered I stammered my reasoning, "No... I was just curious. I kinda skipped school today and wanted to know if I would be back in time."

She immediately sat up straight, all traces of humor gone as her face became suspicious. Quickly bringing up a file, my face and address displayed on her omnitool as she scrutinized it before using a firm tone, almost reprimanding me, she asked "This information is legit? You are eighteen, correct? Not wasting my time?"

"No. I'm eighteen. April eleventh, this past month." The way she had so quickly changed demeanor jarred me enough to panic again. Was there a problem?

Sergeant Muhavi wasn't quite satisfied yet, going over my file and then stopping. She turned to look at me again, this time a bit more relaxed. "Says here you were born on Mindoir and only living on Bek

for the past two years. Were you there for the raid?" At my slow, mournful nod she deflated, swiping away the file and apologizing, "Sorry. I had a guy last week that tried the same stunt. Falsified records."

I was despondent at the reminder of my past but at least she seemed genuinely contrite. If anyone could understand and empathize with what I had gone through a soldier would. In fact, she noticed my emotional downturn and sought to cheer me up. "We should be back by late this afternoon but I'll spring for lunch. My treat."

Bribes of food normally would get my attention but thoughts of Mindoir and what had driven me to this point were at the front of my mind. Was I really doing the right thing? What if I died in service? How would that affect my sisters? How would my grandparents react when they found out I had joined the UNSC? I knew the outcomes wouldn't be positive, but I had to find my own path in life, right?

Seeing as how I hadn't reacted the way she expected she was careful to ask, "You haven't told anyone about your decision, have you?"

"No." My voice was thick. I wasn't near tears, thankfully, but I did feel a bit guilty now. Was I being selfish and insisting on doing things my way, no matter what that made my family feel? How worried or upset they might become? I sighed and stared out the window again. This was so confusing. Deciding to go with honesty, I told her the truth, "They'd probably try to talk me out of it."

Sergeant Muhavi nodded slowly, staring out at the horizon in the distance we were racing towards. After a moment of silence she spoke, neither with her false charm and cheerfulness nor her commanding military tone, but with a very human and caring voice. "This decision is yours to make, just like it was for me and everyone else who wears the uniform. My job is to try and get you to sign up no matter what, but I know better. There are going to be others that will rely upon you and your actions. If you don't think you're up to the responsibility, then don't do it. The UNSC needs people who want to be there for the right reasons." Turning to look at me, she stared into my eyes and asked, "Should I turn around?"

I digested her advice and compared it with Abuela's. This wasn't just some way to evade responsibility, this was a whole new level of it. Suddenly my plans of deferring my choices in life by joining the UNSC sounded childish and stupid. I was running away from things when I needed to grow up and face them. A memory of my mother, one of the last I had with her, on that morning stood out to me. _'Don't you want to do something with your life? Be something besides a farmer on Mindoir?'_

The question still remained. Did I? Could I at least honor her memory by taking her advice? I'd come this far, might as well see what lies beyond. My voice was soft but for the first time in, well forever, I was making a definite decision for my future. No backing out. I was going to join the UNSC. "No. I want to do this."

Whatever I had done or said pleased her, because she smiled, a genuine smile, and nodded. She brought up a file, an analysis of sorts and whistled. "Well, you pretty much aced the online exam we

had you take last week. Barring those that require certain degrees or additional qualifiers, there isn't a job that you can't take." She eyed me again, this time really thoroughly, and looked back at her readout. She shifted around several displays until she got to another file, this one of my past and current school grades. "Not bad. Good scores but a bit of a slacker. You seem to excel at math, science and languages. Anything there catch your interest?"

I groaned and looked back out the window. If I thought this was going to be different or easier than choosing a major in college I was in for a rude awakening.

* * *

><p>Sargasso, Bekenstein, Boltzmann System, Serpent Nebula; May 18th, 2572 [Standardized Earth Calendar], 1306 [Local Time]

"...So I'm running next to this guy and it's coming out of his pores. Diluted ryncol and salarian sushi at five in the morning. After a click and a half I can't take it anymore. I mean we're talking worse than a vorchia shithouse. But I'm not the only one. Once I break ranks to start dry heaving, so does half the formation and the platoon sergeant flips out. Just yelling at all of us until he comes within a few meters of Peterson. He sniffs the air and just gets this horrified look on his face and says 'Private, I don't want to know what crawled up your ass, fornicated with Satan and then died, but if you ever get the wild idea to show up to my formation smelling like this again I will personally drop your ass off on Tuchanka so a pack of rabid varren can dry hump your skull after a krogan stomps your sorry ass to death for getting his lovesick hopes up that you're a piece of krogan ass in heat.'"

I grimaced at the visuals of Sergeant Muhavi's story, not sure if this was supposed to be funny or terrifying. Isn't she supposed to be making me want to join? And here I am having the free meal of take away chinese food being ruined by a tale of someone's idiotic encounter with poisonous liquor and raw salarian seafood. Not the best sales pitch ever, but judging by her cackling she seemed to think it was hilarious. Guess this one of those situations where you had to be there to get the humor.

Her chuckles subsided and she rooted around her container with a fork as she finished her meal. Placing the empty container down she lifted a datapad and looked over the list of things I needed to get done today, pleased at the steady progress we'd made. I'd cleared a background check, a family history check, and a credit check. The final major hurdle was a medical and augmentation check, but I wouldn't receive that until my actual enlistment at the UNSC processing station on the Citadel. The genetics were being processed as we waited, a drop of my blood already analyzed and compared to my genetic template on file with the Systems Alliance as well as all known mutations for enhancements.

About the only interesting thing to note for the day was to learn that my father had a bit of a record from his life before he met my mother. Apparently he was a part of a smuggling crew in his early twenties and would later work with a group of guys on an eezo mining operation in the Traverse that would go on to become members of the United Rebel Front. He had been cleared of any suspicion by ONI and

MI squared years ago, but the note in our family history was on file for future reference, as was both my and Ari's recounting of the raid on Mindoir.

Still, pretty crazy to learn your father was a smuggler and kept company with future terrorists. It gave me pause, wondering if my mother had known and what she thought of that? Did my grandparents or Lizzy know? Because that might explain their opinions.

"Alright, do you know the version or manufacturer of your haptic interface implants?" Sergeant Muhavi's question brought me out of my musings. She had began running down the list of my implants, making notes as I would require upgrades or more implants depending upon what I had.

I wiggled the fingers on my left hand in her direction as I held my container of mushroom fried rice with my right, the subdermal network of sensors in both hands hard to identify with a visual inspection but made a lifetime of difference. No more having to wear haptic gloves and have hands that were clammy and smelly all the time. They had been part of the package when both Ari and myself underwent our bioamp implant network surgery. "Ariake, nine point seven's. I think."

She scanned my hand and nodded, checking the item off her list. Her remarks were adding a wealth of information to my growing understanding of what was going to be expected of me, "Approved but if you're doing more technical work, like piloting or engineering, they're going to want you to have twelves or higher. Fine control and reaction speeds."

Moving on to the next line she asked "Omnitool?"

Placing my food on a nearby desk, I tapped the wristband on my left arm, the haptic sensors activating the dormant omnitool there. I scrolled through the settings until I found what I was looking for. "Kassa Polaris, VII series. Two hundred and twelve Petabytes of virtual optical storage. Genie Personal Assistant VI version twelve dot eight dot one nine two. And Daedalus operating system twenty one dot one."

"Fabrication unit?" I shook my head at her query. Not only was a fabrication unit expensive to own and operate it was a drain on battery life, forcing you to constantly be changing out fuel cells. Sergeant Muhavi entered in a few more notes into her list before addressing me again, "Same deal as the haptic implants. They'll want something more powerful and precise, but that's based upon your MVC. Biotic amp and VI?"

"Sirta, both of them. L3 amp. L3.2 VI." I answered promptly, rather proud of the fact that my biotic status guaranteed me additional pay, roughly a hundred credits a month provided I was in a unit where my biotics were expected to be used extensively. The trade off was that I would be expected to keep up with my fellow soldiers despite needing extra sleep and food.

She clicked her tongue and leaned over to activate her terminal, scrolling through lists until she found what she was looking for, "Amp system stays the same. You're going to get a new VI. The Sirta civilian model doesn't allow you to put out enough juice as a public

safety precaution, apparently."

That was slightly shocking, although it made sense. You didn't want people running around with military grade biotics without military grade training. Ari and I might have been taught by a former Commando but we were still civilians, children at that. But the thought that I had the potential to be even more powerful than I was? That was mind blowing. And a bit exciting.

Her smile was more pronounced as she checked that off her list and looked up at me, "You just earned me a thousand credit bonus. My first biotic recruit. You guys are as rare as a fat Kig-Yar."

I frowned at her comment, not quite sure if I was being insulted or not. Deciding to share in her good humor, I teased her back, "Anyway I could get piece of that bonus? I did help you earn it after all."

Raised eyebrows and a smirk were her response before she shook her head, chuckling at my brash question. She switched the datapad to another file and leaned forward, intent on moving along. "Speaking of bonuses, it's time to pick your MVC. From there we can work out your signing bonus and enlistment terms and get you back to Sargasso."

I weighed my options and the criteria for many positions. I wanted to travel extensively so that pretty much ruled out the Air Force and Army, who were almost as a rule stationed on or near the larger, more established colonies. That left the Marines or Navy. I was pretty sure I wouldn't be comfortable living full time inside a space station or ship, having been raised in the wide open spaces of an outer colony world like Mindoir so I guess Marines were the way to go? Frowning, I looked for holes in my logic, something I might be missing.

Sergeant Muhavi had been studying me during my silence, gauging where my mind was. Here she was, a UNSC soldier herself. What better source of information did I have at hand? "What sort of jobs should I be looking at? With my biotics and test scores?"

She leaned back and pulled up another file on her datapad, scrolling through it until she reached the end. Quirking her lips to the side, she read the display and responded without looking up, "Most biotics are wanted in front line positions, but that's more general than you think. There are military police, combat engineers, and light infantry that could use your skills, although with your test scores I'd lean towards combat engineers"

She tapped a selection and then handed me the pad. I took it and began reading the description of the G series Asymmetric Warfare Engineer. After Unified Combined Military Training those with G MVC were sent to Mars to begin a half year long course that covered a variety of disciplines, revolving around using their technical expertise with equipment, devices and explosives to give them an edge. From there they were assigned to combat arms units where their skills would aid and assist their units in battle.

It sounded more complicated than anything, almost like going to college in fact. Not for the first time I wondered about my decision to skip getting an education. But she had mentioned going back to school to get degrees? How had she done that without leaving the

service? Curious, I asked "You said you went to college later on?"

At her puzzled nod I continued, "How did you do that?"

Her eyebrows rose as her face morphed into an expression of understanding. She reach her hand out and snapped her fingers, requesting the datapad back. Once in her hands she quickly cycled through several files and brought up a signing bonus package and UNSC program that matched personnel with universities across the galaxy that had the best correspondence courses in the fields of study they were interested in. She handed the datapad back and I was impressed. I could work on getting a degree at my own pace while still serving in the UNSC but I glanced at the requirements for the enlistment package and cringed. Eight years, Terran Calendar. I would be twenty six by the time I could leave the service. To my teenage mind that was an eternity.

I looked up and Sergeant Muhavi was leaning back in her chair, arms crossed. She was appraising me again, as if she had found another flaw that raised her concerns. I cautiously handed the datapad back and gestured to it "That's some good stuff, but it's a lot of time."

"It is, but you told me earlier that you didn't think a higher education was for you. And you could have gone to college without help from the UNSC. So what changed?" She pointedly asked, not angry but definitely not amused. I repressed the urge to fidget under her gaze. When my reply didn't come she sighed and leaned forward, clearly annoyed with me. "Look, it's obvious you're looking for reasons to avoid committing and that's fine. But whatever reasons made you interested in the first place are going to be there tomorrow. And the next day. You need to come to terms with whatever those are and make a decision. I don't want to pressure you but I will point out that you had the courage to come this far."

I sat back in my chair, trying to make myself as small as possible. I needed to focus on my own goals and not worry about anything else. Show a little courage. So what were my goals? I did want a to be something more than just a farmer but would being a UNSC soldier be enough? I looked out the window of the office into the streets of Milgrom's shopping district. People walked by in a hurry, talking to companions or to someone on the other end of a call as vehicles whizzed by overhead. Everyone had a purpose. Somewhere to be and something to do. Except me.

If I got an education, that would not only satisfy my family but also prepare me for further opportunities in life, both inside and outside of the UNSC. But eight years? I swallowed, reminded by Abuela's words. I'm not on anyone else's schedule but my own. Looking up at Sergeant Muhavi, I had made up my mind. I would sign on for the college assistance program.

As I was about to speak, her terminal beeped and the screen flashed. The sergeant frowned and held up her finger, halting my announcement before it even started. "Hold that thought for just a second."

She leaned over her desk and began typing away the haptic keyboard, frowning the farther she went. She turned to look across her body at me, suspicious of me yet again. "There's a flag on your medical

records. Related to your genetics."

I furrowed my brows, unsure of what could have caused that. I knew for a fact mom had refused to allow any of us to receive modifications and since we were all born healthy and whole, we had avoided them. The only time I could think of was after the raid, on that UNSC ship... crap. I had totally forgotten about that. I had meant to bring that up this morning. Sheepishly, I smiled as an apology "Oh. Yeah, I forgot about that."

Sergeant Muhavi tilted her head to the side and glared at me, completely flabbergasted and furious with me. "You forgot to tell me what?"

Reaching back to finger the bioamp at the base of my neck, I nervously answered "After Mindoir the doctor on the Einstein found that. She talked to someone from... ONI, I think? They said it was alright and no other doctors have ever found it on my medical records since."

She rocked back in her seat, confusion evident and turned back to her terminal and brought up the records from the Einstein, drumming her fingers on the desk. Reviewing them she began mumbling to herself "Captain Choi. Hmmm. Looks like the CMO redacted the information but forgot a few entries, must have done it manually. Why not use a VI? Did your sister have the same issue? The younger one?"

That was odd. The issue seemed to have been a glitch or non issue, like a false alarm. But having the records manually altered after the fact was very odd, and puzzling. This might have made my plans that much more complicated. Figures. I finally screw up the nerve and have a game plan, half baked as it is, and something else screws it all up. Cautiously, I answered her question and then voiced my concerns. "Uh, yeah. Is there something wrong? Like I can't join?"

She sat silently, staring at the display for a few moments before standing abruptly, grabbing the data pad and syncing it to her terminal. She turned and addressed me, deadly serious and a bit unnerved. "I don't know. This is above my pay grade and they never covered anything like it in my training. I'm going to talk with my CO and see if I can't get some answers. Stay here, don't move and don't touch anything, alright?" At my hesitant nod, she walked away, weaving through the other desks in the office space and towards a private office in the back with glass walls.

An older Asian man in a uniform not unlike her own sat behind his desk, focused on his terminal until he heard his VI inform him of someone wishing to enter. He mouthed something, to which Sergeant Muhavi activated the door and entered. She stopped in front of his desk and stood straight and proud, saluting him until he saluted back. She relaxed and placed the datapad on his desk and began talking, his interest immediately being piqued. She pointed over her shoulder at me and they both looked, staring at me and making me feel incredibly paranoid.

Looking away I took in the rest of the office. There were a handful of other recruiters, all working diligently at their terminals or having vid chats. One lone recruiter on the other side of the office with a young woman with a dark complexion and hair going through the same process as I was. She felt my gaze upon her and nervously met my

eyes, an uneasy smile on her face before her eyes darted back to the datapad in her hands.

Indecision and fear. I could definitely relate.

I glanced back outside and resumed my people watching, willing my mind to forget the mess unfolding in the transparent office not ten meters away. Think positive, I reminded myself. If the flag had been unimportant in the past, then it wasn't going to hold me back now. It would be a better use of my time to figure out what MVC I wanted.

I definitely didn't want to be stuck in any one place for a long time and if I was going to be in the UNSC I wanted to help people. I thought back to the Marines that had arrived on Mindoir. The Lieutenant.. crap. I couldn't remember his name, but I wanted to be like him and his unit. Rushing out to save people from raids and attacks. The more and more I thought about it, the more it made sense.

No one should have to go through what Ari and I went through. The people slaughtered that day on Mindoir, my mother and father included, didn't deserve that. Somewhere out there people I knew growing up are now slaves that would never see home, visit loved ones or be free ever again. Just thinking about it made my blood boil and my fists squeeze painfully.

Thoughts and emotions that I had buried since Mindoir surfaced. Things that the counselors Abuela arranged for me and Ari never knew. Things no one else knew. I wanted to kill pirates. I wanted to kill batarians. I wanted to kill any scum who would hurt people just because they thought they could.

Glaring at the people passing by I was becoming more sure of myself by the second. When Sergeant Muhavi came back I was going to enlist for eight years, college assistance as a UNSC Marine B Series Light Infantryman.

It would be another ten minutes, but when she did come back she seemed shaken, even awed. She gingerly took her seat and nervously looked back at her supervisor, who was standing at the glass wall watching the two of us, his hands behind his back. She nodded to herself and plastered on a smile, so blatantly fake but I didn't care. I just wanted to know if everything was alright. "Well, that's all cleared up and we can proceed. Have you given it anymore thought?"

Nodding, I wasted no time. "The college assistance program and Marines, B series."

Her eyes widened but she nodded, dumbstruck and began filling out the forms on her datapad. Working in silence for a few minutes she finally finished and handed me a stylus and the datapad, pointing to locations where I would sign and date, walking me through the contract.

Within the hour we were walking out to the skycar and I was one step closer to becoming a UNSC Marine. The only part left was the medical exam, but that would happen at the MEPS on the Citadel the day after my graduation. After that I would finalize my contract and be sworn in, followed by a trip to Reach to begin UCMT.

Sergeant Muhavi had been very quiet and subdued since walking out of that office, only talking when she needed to clarify something or ask me to sign. During the ride back she played music and seemed lost in her thoughts, enough that I respected that. Maybe she had been reprimanded for what she had done? Or maybe lost her bonus for signing me? I didn't want to ask since, despite her friendliness, she really was a stranger to me and whatever happened might be intruding upon her privacy.

Instead I occupied myself with running scenarios through my mind about just how I was going to break the news to everyone. Actually, that's not true. Telling them was the easy part. Surviving the storm that would follow? That was going to be difficult. I reminded myself that I only had a little less than a month to go. After that? I was my own man and off to see the galaxy as a UNSC Marine. No more family drama and no more Bekenstein.

We landed in Sargasso approximately twenty minutes before my Abuela would be showing up to pick up me and Ari from school. I stood awkwardly next to the skycar, unsure of what to do or say. I wouldn't be seeing her again, barring some major development between now and my enlistment date at MEPS. Someone from her recruiting office would be picking me up the night before to put me on a flight to the Citadel. So did I salute or give a handshake or a hug? I mean, technically, wasn't I lower rank than her now?

She seemed to sense my hesitance and smiled, a real genuine smile and stood from the skycar to shake my hand. "It's been a pleasure, Shepard. For what it's worth, I think you made a good decision all around." She hesitated to continue but blew out a breath and activated her omnitool, syncing with my own and sending a packet of information with a beep. "That's the latest brochure for the University of Illyria. They do great work with UNSC troops looking to get an education while still in service." She became serious and pointed towards my omnitool, "The next month or so start going over their courses and plan what you want to take so that when you're done with UCMT and your MVC you can start your education the moment you sign in with your first unit. Don't slack off on this. I can't tell you what that flag meant, but if it's real, then it's in your best interest to get an education out of the way very quickly. Trust me."

Confused, I glanced down at my omnitool and then back at her, unsure of what to make of her cryptic advice. She seemed to be trying to help me but avoiding telling me what the flag meant. Clearly I wasn't in trouble but it had some implications for me later down the line. With nothing else to go on and the advice she gave me useful, I had no choice but to agree. "I will. Thank you, for everything."

She waved me off and stepped back into the skycar, buckling herself in. "No problem. Now if you'll excuse me, I have a thousand credit bonus to spend. If I see you again, maybe I'll buy you a beer, recruit."

I laughed and gave her a mock salute to which she rolled her eyes. "Don't salute me, recruit. I work for a living." And with that, the skycar closed and she waved through the window as I stepped back, the hum of the vehicles engines resonating in my chest. As it lifted off I could feel the tingle of the mass effect field in my eezo nodules,

making my nervous system send a pleasant sensation through my body which mingled with the hum of nervous energy and anticipation coursing through my body.

I had done it. I was one step away from joining the UNSC.

Once she had disappeared beyond the rooftops of nearby buildings I sighed to myself, hands in my pockets, and headed back towards the academy. This was going to be one hard thing to explain tonight.

* * *

><p>Sargasso, Bekenstein, Boltzmann System, Serpent Nebula; June 12th, 2572 [Standardized Earth Calendar], 1742 [Local Time]

The setting sun cast a beautiful array of rainbows through the panels of the conservatory. I'd be lying to myself if I didn't admit that this would be one of the things that would be missed about living here. Whenever I was stressed or annoyed, sitting in one of the several artificially recreated environments was soothing.

Which meant I was out here regularly, practically living here the past two weeks. Saying the reactions to my decision had been less than favorable would be as much an understatement as saying that Blasto movies were less than accurate. There was no way a jellyfish did half of those things so there was no way I managed to escape that conversation unscathed.

On the positive side, I think I learned every variant of being called an idiot in several different languages. And that was before Lizzy came home from college a week ago.

Even Abuela and Ari had been shocked and lacking in enthusiasm, but when I reminded my grandmother about the advice she gave me her face was stricken with sorrow. So taking a wild guess, joining the UNSC wasn't what she meant by finding my own path to happiness.

No matter. Every word and reaction was strengthening my resolve. The more I heard how stupid an idea it was the more I knew I had done the right thing.

School had become a lesson in being a pariah as everyone had the odd idea that I was going to attack them at any given moment for the slightest insult or annoyance. It had been a bumpy ride, but I weathered the storm. The end was only hours away now that I had attended my official graduation ceremony earlier today, complete with subdued applause and murmurs when it was my turn to receive my diploma.

In the next hour or so, a low level admin clerk from the recruiters office was going to arrive to escort me to the tether elevator near the equator. From there I would ride up to the orbital station up above and board a transport bound for the Citadel and the Serpent Nebula MEPS located there. Then I would be processed, have my physical and finally inducted into service. Finally I would board another transport to my training facility, which was still up in the air but odds placed it on Reach.

And that is how I found myself here, inside the desert conservatory

and enjoying the solitude of the moment. Chances were someone was bound to pester me about having sentimental farewells or one last tongue lashing. The longer I hid, the better my chances were that I could avoid the bulk of it. Or so I thought.

The sound of crunching gravel and sand from behind alerted me to the fact I was no longer alone. The steps were light and slow, which automatically ruled out Lizzy or Abuelo, who were prone to forceful and angry strides when walking towards me. Abuela was far more leisurely in her pace leaving the only logical conclusion of my mystery companion being Ari. She had been fearful and distant once she had learned of my enlistment, causing me to feel a twinge of guilt. The only real association we had with the military were the Air Force guards at space docks and orbital stations, our Tio Kamal, and the swarm of uniformed and armed soldiers who arrived to help the survivors of Mindoir. I knew that when she thought of those things, she thought of her experiences from that day. Our mother's dead body. The times we were shot at or chased. Her wild, almost feral attack on the asari slaver. And her own harrowing time alone when she ran and hid for those hours after I had told her to. It's a miracle she survived on her own by heading back to the aqueduct and moving further away from the town and towards the coast where she was found by the first shuttles of Marines that touched down on the surface from the Einstein.

Her voice pierced my musings, soft and timid. "Hey. Everyone is looking for you."

She came up on my right and took a seat on the bench next to me. Dressed in a navy blue pair of track pants and one of Lizzy's gray Harvard sweaters, her hair in an messy ponytail, my youngest sister looked morose. Her eyes were a bit red and teary, no doubt from the comments that were flying about from my Abuelo and Lizzy. The very same reason I was hiding out here.

Cowardly? Of course. But discretion is the better part of valor. I shrugged and continued gazing at the refraction of light playing through the ceiling panes. "Is my ride here?"

She shook her head, the ponytail at the back of her head swishing back and forth. Placing her arms behind herself, she leaned back and joined in on my silent contemplation.

After several moments my curiosity forced me to break the stillness of our observations and ask something I know I would regret. "Did they say what they wanted?"

It was silly. I knew what they wanted but I just could not help myself. Self sabotage is a pain in the ass. Ari heaved a sigh and slightly shrunk in on herself as she began playing with the hem of her sweater. "No but Nana is crying."

I unconsciously mimicked her posture and resumed my absent minded staring at the panes above. I hated causing my Abuela pain but I needed to do this. She knew that. This was the path I had chosen. Glancing at Ari it was obvious to see that she was just as afflicted. And no doubt the fact Abuelo and Lizzy were being vocal in their disapproval was exacerbating that situation. My sister in particular since Abuelo had vented his spleen for the past month. "So I take it Lizzy is still bitching?"

"It's not bitching if it's accurate, hermano."

The both of us jerked our heads in the direction of our older sister who had stealthily entered the conservatory and our conversation. Glaring with arms crossed, she stuck out like a sore thumb in the red and brown hues of the recreated Australian Outback desert. Her stylish tight white coat and pants were designer and screamed expensive. As were her brown varren leather heeled boots. I somehow got the idea she was more upset about having to wait for me to leave before she could head out and do whatever it was she planned on doing tonight than she was about anything to do with my enlistment. Still, I wasn't thrilled to have my quiet before the storm prematurely brought it to an end.

Looking at Ari in suspicion, I questioned her sincerity in coming out here to find me. "You didn't tell me she was following you."

"You didn't ask. 'Sides, how was I supposed to know she was stupid enough to try to act like a ninja in her Mounayars?" If she was troubled for ignoring to inform me about that little detail then she wasn't showing it. Typical Ari. When in doubt, go on the attack.

Sighing and bracing myself for the inevitable reprimands headed my way I was suddenly struck by the absurdity of it all. And most importantly Ari's detailed observation. "Wait. How do you know what kind of shoes she has on?"

For once Ari was chagrined. Her eyes wide as saucers for a moment before recovering and dismissing my question. "Oh, she won't stop talking about them. Or how much they cost."

Lizzy narrowed her eyes at her baby sister, defiant and indignant. "Oh really? Is that why Abuela asked if you wanted a pair and you said yes?"

Now Ari's normally tanned features took on a distinct pinkish hue in the fading light as she childishly protested her innocence, "No I didn't!"

"Seriously? What? Are they specially made so you can be an even bigger eavesdropping pain in the ass?" Granted I wasn't looking forward to any of this conversation but it was fun to tease my two sisters one last time before I left.

"You're in no position to call anyone a pain I the ass, Luis." Ugh. Spoke too soon. Lizzy took a few quick strides until she was standing in front of me, hands on her hips and ready to tear into me one last time. "Did you plan on staying out here and avoiding everyone until you were ready to leave?"

I nodded curtly and gave her a sarcastic smile, glibly replying without thinking. "Yep. That was the plan. It's peaceful and quiet out here." Looking upwards I could now start to make out the evening sky and the stars that I would be traveling through soon. Looking back at Lizzy I decided to slide a dig in at her. "Or it least it was up until a couple of minutes ago."

Not the least bit fazed she pressed on, "It's spineless."

Agitation and irritation were spiking in my mind. I was already slightly nervous at the prospect of just what the final testing would involve at MEPS but then there was the whole aspect of taking my life down a new and unknown path. I was eager but anxious, and I definitely didn't need to deal with this shit. "Aaaaaaaaaaand that's the reason I'm out here. Thanks, Liz. Appreciate it."

She glared, baring her teeth and breathing heavily before composing herself. A shake of her head preceded her calm but disgusted reply "It's like you want everyone to be proud of your decision to throw your life away."

"Or maybe I want you and everyone else to stop being so over dramatic. It's only eight years. Besides, Tio Kamal said it's relatively rare to die unless there is a war going on. Most people who enlist get out perfectly fine." I was tired of this conversation. It didn't matter what was said or that it was my life, my choice. The only thing that mattered was I was not following some recognizable and approved path.

"What if he's wrong?" Ari's soft voice questioned. She was looking between the two of us with trepidation. I was reminded of her tearful reaction to our parent's fighting that last day on Mindoir and struck at how similar in nature Lizzy and I were to our parents.

I reached out and rubbed her lower back before pulling her into a one-armed hug which she gladly accepted, wrapping her arms around my midsection and squeezing, painfully. Attempting to reassure her I restated the facts, "The majority of people who join the UNSC don't die, Ari. It's going to be okay."

"Don't lie to her." Lizzy barked, my consoling of Ari having the opposite effect on her. Jabbing her finger at me she continued her tirade. "You said it yourself. You joined to help save people. They gave you a choice to do anything and you chose to be one of the ones fighting in every dark corner of the galaxy. You chose to risk your life."

Images of Mindoir played through my mind. All the death and destruction. How couldn't Lizzy understand that I didn't want to have that happen to anyone else ever again? We glared at one another, both refusing to budge from our heated staring contest. Ari broke the tension yet again with her honesty, "I don't want you to die like Mom and Dad."

"I'm not-"

"You don't know that!" Ari jumped up and screamed before I could finish my sentence.

I glanced between my two sisters, one staring at me with loathing and the other silently trying to will reality to something more agreeable and happy. Rubbing my face with my hands to do something to release the stress and nervous energy flooding my system, I asked "Can either of you tell me what the point of this is? I'm enlisted. It's done. I leave tonight."

"Without talking to anyone first! You made an impulsive, stupid, reckless, selfish decision!" Lizzy was approaching screaming banshee

levels with her verbal attacks and I was none too appreciative about it.

But before I could respond Ari yet again interjected herself into the conversation, this time with just as much vigor and volume as her older sister. "Because you and Tata keep yelling at him! I'd leave too if everyone was treating me like I was stupid!"

As much as I wanted to agree with her a shred of self doubt began gnawing at my stomach. I was running away from my problems here on Bekenstein. Sure I had other reasons to join, but that was a pretty big one.

Her anger redirected, Lizzy leveled her glare on Ari and hurled an insult at her. "We're upset. Justifiably so because he acts more immature than you do and that's not saying much."

"Shut the fuck up, Lizzy! You think you're so smart and perfect and that we all want to be like you but we don't! You're just a stuck up self centered bitch!" As amusing as this was I knew the warning signs of an impending Araceli Lindsey Shepard full verbal diarrhea meltdown. If I didn't step in and stop this Ari was going to unleash a shitstorm, literally, of colorful language that would lead to Lizzy retaliating with cruel words designed to maximize pain. Both of them would regret it later.

Thankfully Lizzy seemed to recognize it as well as she calmed herself but wanted to get the last word in before there was a ceasefire to hostilities. Folding her arms she coolly glared at her youngest sibling and replied condescendingly, "And you're just a spoiled little brat with a foul mouth. Always have been. I'm not going to sink to your level of pouting and throwing a tantrum." She speared me with her gaze and continued her lecture, "And I'm not going to sink to your level of self pity and apathy."

Whatever notions I had of being the bigger person and quelling this stupid argument went out the window. Her comments bothered me, but I was used to her disrespect towards me. But her comments toward Ari? Even if she deserved them right now I wasn't going to let Lizzy start picking on Ari in my absence. No way, no how. "You say whatever the fuck you want about me, but leave Ari out of this." Summoning the most intense glare I could, I made my intentions very clear. "I don't want to hear a single word about you starting up on her with the same shit you try with me just because I'm not around anymore."

Lizzy grinned, not the least bit intimidated, and I belatedly remembered I was dealing someone who was in training to be lawyer, something she seemed born to do. Her mock sincerity cut me down and ignited more anger. "What do you care? You're running away from all of this, remember? Isn't that what you wanted? To avoid all of us?"

I closed my eyes and counted to ten. Willing the red in my vision away while breathing through my nose. When I opened my eyes, I stared my older sister down and hit her back just as hard "I wanted to go back and restart the farm, but you took that choice away."

Ari, sensing the blood in the water, pounced on my statement to hammer Lizzy from another angle. "Without asking us what we thought. That was our home too."

Slightly rocked back on her heels, Lizzy's crossed arms seemed to squeeze like she was hugging herself. She shook her head, her dark brown waves moving about as she did her best to shrug off our accusations. "No. You two are not going to try and turn this around on me. I'm not the bad guy here. I'm the responsible one. I did the right thing. Maybe when you both grow up you'll understand." She finally had the courage to look at either of us and added snidely, "Although that's asking for a miracle at this point."

Even in the face of her own hypocrisy about failing to take others into consideration before she acted recklessly and selfishly Lizzy still could not see the truth. I let her know it, earning an exaggerated nod from Ari. "Priceless. Queen Elizabeth knows best."

Quickly retaking the offensive, Lizzy turned my remark about names back on me. "Don't start on names, Luis Vincent. I'm not the one with a name that gives me some misguided death wish to live up to."

I was tired of this never ending argument. It was circular and pointless. Still, I rose to the bait and replied, "Fuck off. I don't have a death wish."

"What you don't have is a clue. You could have gone to college." Lizzy was one of those people who could compliment you while being scornful. It was about as amazing as Ari's potty mouth. And we were back to the issue of college again. Circular. Never ending. Pointless. Infuriating.

"Here we go again. It's like a busted VI stuck repeating the same thing over and over." I groaned while rubbing my fingers through my hair to massage my scalp in a vain attempt to massage away my frustration. When it didn't work I glared at Lizzy and reminded her, "By the way, I am going to college, you dipshit."

Not missing a beat, she recited her same tired, disgusted response, "Correspondence courses with some third rate colony university? You call that getting an education?" She jabbed her finger at me again in an accusatory manner and I had the fleeting urge to snap the offending finger wagging centimeters from my face. "You could have done much better and you know it. Don't try to fool me with something haphazard you tacked onto your moronic decision as an afterthought."

"Give it a rest, Lizzy. Didn't I just say not everyone wants to be like you?" Ari adopted a pose similar to her sister, arm crossed and disapproving frown while she lectured. "Are you going to yell and bitch at me too when it's my time to pick a school?"

Indignant and frustrated, Lizzy growled before replying "You two are infuriating." Taking a deep breath, she calmed and realized this was a losing battle. "Fine. Throw away your lives, the both of you. But don't you come crying to me when things turn out less than stellar."

Ari cheerfully rejoined, "Well the only reason I'd come crying to you is if my sorority sisters thought my shoes were so last season."

I didn't get the context of the remark but it hit it's target dead

center. Lizzy's eyes narrowed while her face took on a deep crimson shade. Her normally quick mind and wit slowed to a crawl as I could practically see the metaphorical circuits firing behind her eyes. Giving into whatever temptation was eating her, she glanced down at her shoes, mounawhatevers, and growled in annoyance at the layer of fine red dust across their supple brown hide and along the hem of her white pants. Turning on her heels she marched out of the conservatory with an angry stride that caused her hair to comically bounce with each step.

Shocked beyond words, I turned to stare at Ari with raised eyebrows, silently asking what that was about.

She shrugged and smiled, "There was a reason she couldn't stop talking about her shoes."

I nodded impressed by her logic. But if there was anything I knew about my older sister, it was that she could hold a grudge. Ari had just asked for retribution at a time and place of Lizzy's choosing. "Are you going to be okay? She's going to be pissed for weeks because of that."

"I know. She never forgets anything but I know a few more secrets she doesn't want me to tell anyone." Ari's trademark impish grin making me wonder what secrets of mine she had stored handy for blackmail.

But as with all things, my curiosity got the better of my need for self preservation. "Like?"

Ari's grin became wider as she peered off into the distance of the now nearly dark conservatory. Once she was sure Lizzy had actually left, she turned to me and gushed in her gossipy manner "Like how she might have asked Nana about dating older men."

I frowned and digested that information. Even at the height of my anger with my sister I didn't want anything bad to happen to her. And given that most humans didn't leave their primes until their late fifties or early sixties, the dating scene was much deeper than it had historically been for the human race. Even then, you were not considered elderly until you were well past a century, so there was no telling what 'older men' meant. It was her life, but I didn't like the thought of some creep taking advantage of her. "How much older?"

"I didn't hear any ages but knowing Lizzy it's anyone that owns nice things. And probably with kids almost as old as her." Ari's response was catty but not entirely out of the realm of possibility. Our sister was more than a bit materialistic but I still thought she had more self respect and common sense than to find herself an older man to be her sugar daddy.

In fact, I know she wouldn't. Lizzy was too stubborn and proud to do anything of the sort. So more than likely this older guy was probably her attempt to date someone more mature and sophisticated. Which meant she probably had a low opinion of the guys her age and at her college. Now that was more in line with Lizzy's thinking.

I shook my head and grinned, mocking our sister while defending her self reliance. "Nah. Knowing her she probably thinks every guy her

age is an infuriating slacker with little to no redeeming value because he doesn't have his entire life planned out. But then again she thinks that way about everyone, so who knows?"

Ari giggled, slugging me in the shoulder before hugging me "I'm going to miss you, dumbass."

"I'm going to miss you too." I hugged Ari before warning bells went off. This was suspiciously like her usual set up for a put down. Backing away from the hug I narrowed my eyes with mock scrutiny, "Wait. Why are you going to miss me?"

She quirked her lips to the right and gave me a pitiful gaze "Once you're gone they're going to be focusing all that attention on me now." Sighing she rolled her eyes in anticipation. "The next four years are going to be brutal."

Playfully shoving her away I gave her a faux reprimand, "Nice priorities."

"Seriously, he's really going to take over your room and be up in that wing of the house all the time. Thanks for nothing." Ari put her hands on her hips in an amusing attempt to seem serious since she couldn't keep a wide grin off her face.

I nodded and accepted her thanks, "Glad I could help." Sobering, I changed the tone of our playful banter to make sure she wasn't hiding truth behind her laughs. "No jokes. Are you going to be okay?"

Ari rolled her eyes and nodded, "Unlike you I don't have an aversion to getting an education."

"Really?" I shouldn't have been shocked, but I was. Maybe I was more amazed that despite our jokes about Lizzy, my younger sister had already planned her education while I had dithered and looked for options besides that.

She shivered and nodded theatrically, deadly serious when replying "Yeah. After seeing what they did to you I said fuck that. I'll go to school."

"Glad I could be your guinea pig. You know what for already?" I managed to be insulted and curious. Consider me talented. I swear this curiosity is going to get me into serious trouble one day.

Lifting her right hand she made a fist as a surge of static electricity poured from her, encasing her in a dark blue corona of dark energy as she lifted a nearby bench a few centimeters with her thoughts. The excess energy caused her hair to lift and my own body to tingle as my eezo nodules which in turn caused me to shiver involuntarily. She lowered the bench back down and panted as the blue glow faded. Her face was bright red but a beaming and proud smile seemed to shine even brighter. Once she had regained her breath she looked up at me and inclined her head towards the bench. "Biotics. I really want to learn more about us. Matron Malegos made me think a lot about that and it interests me."

I rolled my shoulders to release the pent up shivers from her biotics and nodded. It was a very good goal. Humans only understood the

basics of biotics, which were unique to each species, and even more unique to each individual. My sister was a natural and the perfect person to dedicate her time and energy to studying this, but I couldn't help but ask the same annoying questions people asked me. "You want to do research? Or teach kids to use their biotics?"

Rather than react poorly as I had, Ari grinned and asked "Why not both?"

I fingered the bioamp at the base of my neck and thought about it. Why not both? My sister could do it. She was certainly talented and smart enough. Although, maturity and professionalism might be an issue. Teasing her I replied, "Doctor Araceli Shepard. I don't see that happening. I also don't see anyone letting you around their kids with your mouth."

"Pfffft. I make swearing look good." Ari dismissed my concerns with a lazy flick of her wrist and all the confidence in the galaxy.

Folding my arms, I raised one eyebrow and challenged her cocky answer, "If you says so. I think Abuela would have a different opinion on the matter."

Wincing, Ari rubbed her left forearm as she recalled just how disapproving our grandmother could be of her mouth. "Yeesh. She's worse than Mom ever was. She's still on my ass for calling Yessenia an inbred cock smuggling sack of varren shit. That was like, months ago."

My jaw dropped slightly of it's own accord. I had remembered the scandal of Ari having run her mouth at school and getting caught for it, but I never knew what was said. Or why. "Remind me again, why did this girl deserve to be called that?"

Shrugging as if the punishment fit the crime, she smoothly replied "She tried to steal my boyfriend."

What?

She... wait. What?

I shook my head slowly to process what I had just heard. My baby sister. Called another girl... whatever, not the point. More importantly, she tried to steal her boyfriend. Maybe I was approaching this the wrong way. Maybe she meant friend that was a boy. And this girl was trying to make him her friend.

The suppressed mirth on her face made me doubt that. I needed clarification. "You have a boyfriend?"

Having far too much fun at my expense, Ari seemed to be holding in a laughing fit as she replied around her chuckles. "Duh. Since last summer. Who do you think Nigel was?"

Nigel? The scrawny little twerp that followed my baby sister around? Really? Him? I was too overwhelmed to respond with anything but honesty "One of your dorky little friends?"

"Correction. One of my dorky not so little friends." Ari's grin was almost... salacious. Wait, did that mean? No. Oh hell no.

Burying my face in my hands it occurred to me that she was only sharing this information because she knew it was zero hour for my leaving. No time to go and find this little twerp Nigel and introduce him to a biotically powered kick in the ass for even looking at my baby sister. And she knew it. "I really didn't need to hear this."

"You knew this had to happen one day. It was inevitable." She was having far too much fun with this, patting me on the shoulder and using a mocking tone. Maybe I could convince the guy picking me up to make a quick detour. He had to know the deal with this sort of thing, right?

Or maybe I could let our family know, so that little twerp Nigel gets ripped apart by them. I pinched the bridge of my nose and asked, "Unbelievable. Does Abuela know about this?"

"And approves. Says he's a nice boy. She just doesn't know how nice." Ari waggled her eyebrows for extra emphasis before dissolving into peals of laughter in the darkness, our features only lit now by the moonlight of Tyche. "Here's hoping the UNSC helps you get your first girlfriend, hermano"

Oh, for fuck's sake! Not only does my little sister have a boyfriend but now she's pointing out my lack of dating experience? Where in the hell was this driver? I am ready to leave any second now. Ari seemed to sense my dread and exasperation because the hits kept coming. "Or at least helps you get laid." She paused and pondered for a moment, waiting for just the right moment to finish her setup as I cringed in anticipation. "Would an alien prostitute count?"

Yep. She took it there. I looked up into the night sky and beseeched whatever deity that was having fun fucking with my life tonight to please stop. "Wonderful. My little sister is teasing me about sex. My night is complete. Thank you universe. You can stop anytime now."

Ari doubled over in laughter and despite the revelations and my own mortification, I was buoyed by her infectious good mood. It was good to see her laughing and smiling given her emotional state just a few minutes ago.

Of course I knew she was only teasing me, although that little twerp Nigel had better have left Bekenstein the first time I come home on leave. After calming down she smiled at me and reintroduced the reality that awaited me outside the confines of this conservatory. "Wrong again, dumbass. Lets' go inside so Tata can berate you one last time and Nana can drench you in tears."

My buoyed mood crashed and burned as I soured at the prospect of one final round with Abuelo and any last parting shots from Lizzy. Although I did want to say bye to my Abuela and thank her for her support and advice. I steeled myself and looked in the direction of the door for the conservatory, "Joy."

My sister nudged me with her shoulder and coaxed me forward, "C'mon. Be brave. You're gonna be a big bad Marine." We fell in step together

and she quieted, processing what she had just said. Looking up at me she asked, "Do me a favor?"

Sensing what was coming I gave her my full attention. Ari was obviously recalling her fear of my dying and wanted to get her tearful goodbye done out here in private. The least I could do was honor whatever request she had, "Yeah?"

Reaching out and grabbing my left hand, she squeezed it and gave me a watery smile. "Stay safe, okay?" I nodded and like our normal procedure for subjects too serious for an immature pair of siblings, she broke the tension with a joke. "And buy me stuff."

I raised an eyebrow and tossed her hand back at her in a teasing manner, "You do know I won't be getting paid that much, right? And please tell me you're not going to turn into Lizzy? I probably can't afford a pair of those mounawhatevers."

Ari's head jerked back at the insult, slightly annoyed. "Fuck you."

"Nope. That's your little buddy Nigel's job." My reply was out of my mouth before it registered in my mind. We both stared at each other in shock before our faces melted. Mine into disgust and hers into joy. I murmured to myself, "And I can't believe I just said that."

Clamping herself back onto my left arm with both of hers, I had to support Ari for the better part of half the journey back to the house as she couldn't stop her howls of laughter. After about two minutes I could see the humor in it. Slightly. Still didn't mean a thing about me not killing or maiming this twerp Nigel. And what the hell sort of name is that? Finally over her laughing fit, my sister decided to clarify just what she actually wanted, "Okay, you know what I want? What I really, really, really want?"

Frowning at her, I tried to recall why that phrase sounded so familiar. Then I remembered Ari's fascination with precolonial era pop music. I frowned in distaste as I contemplated where this joke was headed. "Have you been overdosing on the classic pop music station again?"

She frowned and looked down at her omnitool in confusion before looking back at me cross eyed. "No?"

"Nevermind. So what do you want? A smack upside the head? Because I can give you one of those for free right now." I used my left hand to ensnare her by the waist and prepare a haymaker with right.

She laughed, kicked and squirmed her way free, taking two bounding steps ahead before spinning around in place to face me and walking backwards. Wagging a disapproving finger in my direction she playfully mocked, "Violence is never the answer, Pavlo punchout." We chuckled and she let me know what it is that she really wanted, "Learn as many swear words in other languages as you can so you can teach me. Alien ones too."

"Can't you learn that stuff on the extranet?" I was flabbergasted at her request. She could just watch a load of vids and be current on every way to insult anyone in the galaxy.

Ari shook her head and explained her reasoning, still walking backwards. "You know the translations VI's never work that way. You have to know the style and way to use it in phrases. How best to use the words and combinations. Otherwise you're just going to sound lame."

Incredible. She actually did have her foul mouth down to a science. Nodding my head I agreed to her request as I looked into the lit windows of the house, dreading every step we took closer. Looking at Ari again I questioned aloud, "You think I could get away with slapping Lizzy upside the head instead of hugging her goodbye?"

My sister winced and shook her head fervently. "Not a good idea. She smacks back. Hard."

Staring at her incredulously I was once again floored by her answer. I had only meant it as a joke and here Ari had first hand knowledge of how it would play out. Did I even want to know?

...Of course I did. "How in the galaxy do you know that?"

She looked over her shoulder towards the house and then back at me, shaking her head. I guess there were some things Ari wouldn't gossip about. Like things that got her smacked upside the head by our older sister who evidently managed to do the impossible. Shut our baby sister up. Ah, family. I looked at Ari with a slowly spreading grin, feeling sentimental about everything for a moment. At her confused stare, I replied "Never change, twerp."

[End Chapter]

* * *

><p>Codex Entry: Transportation

The advent of Mass Effect and Slipstream technology has had an enormous effect on the galaxy and the way it does transportation, commerce, and colonization.

The most important influence happens before a vehicle or form of transportation is created. Mass Effect fields, advanced chemistry, and nanotech engineering allow for the creation of materials far stronger and lighter than anything a species could create prior. This in turn creates creates the foundation of modern society where comforts, advances, and commodities are cheap, easy to obtain and plentiful. With this widespread influence comes a need to regulate the raw power of such a society on the move in so many different ways.

Modern transportation is divided into four generalizations accepted throughout the galaxy. Terrestrial, which includes ground based and lower atmospheric travel around planets. Orbital, which consists of movement around the orbit of a large celestial body. Interplanetary, dedicated to routes and transport within a star system. And Interstellar, which covers the use of FTL, or faster than light, drives and mass relays to move between any star system in the galaxy.

Terrestrial travel is the most complex and nuanced facet of galactic

transportation as it intimately involves so many different aspects of galactic society. Sky vehicles, terrestrial vehicles, shuttles, mass transit, barges, space ports, and tether stations all represent the different modes of transportation generally available throughout the galaxy. The primary concern for a government is how best to avoid accidents and keep traffic flowing smoothly. Large metropolises often seek to discourage private vehicle usage by providing robust mass transit systems and a dedicated fleet of automated taxis. Long distance travel across a planet is conducted by private and commercial vehicles that are entirely automated as they navigate lanes at high levels of speed.

Orbital transport is more difficult, and dangerous, but perhaps the most vital. All goods and passengers wishing to move from terrestrial locations to interplanetary or interstellar travel must pass through orbital checkpoints. Space tethers/elevators, orbital stations, skyhooks, and space ports serve as the primary infrastructure on the majority of populated worlds for orbital transport. This is done as a precaution for practical, commercial, safety, and security reasons. The large amount of orbital infrastructure surrounding a planet with a mature population makes it imperative that orbital transportation be highly organized and controlled. Even with VIs controlling operations the potential for disaster with high end thrusters, element zero cores, mass effect fields and the sheer mass of some vehicles is too much to be left to chance.

Interplanetary travel is rather straightforward although the details are more intricate and nuanced. Small shuttle craft and larger interstellar vehicles use mass effect fields and thruster power to navigate approved courses between celestial bodies within a solar system. Additionally, vessels are directed towards refueling and discharging stations that are maintained in several convenient locations across the system. Because of gravitational considerations and the constant motion of celestial bodies these routes shift daily. Monitoring and plotting of these courses is handled by the local authority within the system and typically enforced by military means to prevent accidents or potential threats. Subluminal travel between 5% to 50% the speed of light is generally considered safe to prevent catastrophe with mass effect fields. With all factors considered, this results in travel times between celestial bodies of a solar system ranging from minutes to a handful of hours.

Interstellar travel is the crowning achievement of galactic civilization, allowing for relatively quick and easy movement between stars. It is divided between two types, self powered or relay powered. Current travel speeds for FTL range from the standard civilian and freighter [Human Translation: 8 to 12 light years per 24 Standard Terran Hours] to high end military craft [Human Translation: 12 to 16 light years per 24 Standard Terran Hours]. Mass Relays make this travel more efficient, allowing for vessels to increase their speed by nearly 700 fold at a fraction of the power consumption costs by acting as point to point beacons of a warped corridor, or tunnel, through the Slipstream. The primary concerns with interstellar travel are costs, maintenance, speeds, infrastructure, and the potential for mass effect field catastrophes. FTL travel requires fusion reactors providing power to a large element zero core and translight engine. These expensive pieces, their maintenance, and their consumption of power is cost prohibitive, making it economical for only larger vessels to house these systems and still carry enough goods or passengers that make the trip worthwhile. Additional considerations

such as discharging excessive static electric build up put a barrier on how long an FTL system can be operated before exiting the Slipstream is required. Typically most commercial vessels do not travel under their own power farther than a 20 to 30 light year radius around the star systems with infrastructure for refueling and repairs. Most extensive exploration and military patrolling extends only 60 to 100 light years from the same systems. This leaves huge swaths of the galaxy unexplored and uninhabited as relay travel skips past these 'dead' parts of space.

* * *

><p>Codex Entry: Virtual Intelligence

Virtual intelligence is the culmination of computing technology and programming used to assist in a variety of ways. VIs functionality is incorporated into nearly everything, usually with a dedicated VI embedded within the device or connectivity to other VI systems allowing their complex computational power and multitasking to interface.

A virtual intelligence, or VI, is the premiere automated service, possessing an ability to think, adapt, anticipate and respond within set parameters. Despite this intuitive nature a VI is not truly sentient. Their ability to acknowledge or even contemplate areas outside of their programming is nonexistent. In this way a VI functions like an extension of society by performing duties and tasks that are found to be tedious, difficult, dangerous or bothersome.

The commonplace nature of VI systems makes them such an expected part of life that their presence often becomes unnoticed. Yet they exist everywhere and control many of the functions taken for granted in everyday life. VI systems can be thought of as assistants, caretakers and watchmen.

VI programming is centered around a level of flexibility in self correcting and self learning behavior connected to an extensive knowledge database in order to ensure the system can respond to it's purpose. This adaptability has limits as the VI possesses no programming to affect a synthetic analogue to neural functions. The VI remains non sentient and it is only through the brilliance and sophistication of etiquette and social programming that they can even begin to mimic sapient behavior. The typical VI has very little need for social interaction with sapients as the majority do little more than toil in the background. If there arises a need for interaction, basic programming is equipped to allow for limited communication which usually consists of warnings, notifications, reports and data transfers.

In the event that a VI is expected to interact with sapients regularly it is given a complex set of programming to complete it's job. Such VI's have incorporated functions which are designed to emulate social behavior with a limited range of response and interaction. Studies and experimentation have proven that all sapient species possess a subliminally negative response to VI systems that seek to perfectly emulate a sapient but possesses obvious behavioral cues that confirms it's synthetic nature. Therefore these functions must tread a fine line between utility to their expected tasks and provoking mistrust from the very public they are designed to assist.

To this end a VI with social programming is often given personality imprints that allows for realistic interaction but are combined with heavily synthesized voices and clearly synthetic avatars to establish it's synthetic nature. This combination has proven to work best, allowing seamless operation with minimal unfavorable reactions from sapients.

The usage of VIs is not without risk as evidenced by the Quarian Genocide. The quarian people began networking VIs for military and infrastructure, finding that the VIs were able to interface, organize, and pool computational assets and tasks to become more effective. This gave way to limited sentience if the collective of VIs was large and complex enough. What followed next is still up to speculation as all recordings and data were lost when the quarian VIs, or Geth, rebelled. The commonly held theory is that the VIs formed a manner of artificial intelligence known as a swarm intelligence. What provoked them is unclear, but with complete control of the military, industrial, economic, telecom, and life support systems on every quarian controlled planet, colony, ship and station the result was inevitable. Unable to escape or form an effective resistance the quarian people were massacred in under a galactic year, going from a total population of 42 billion to the current Migrant Fleet population of 17 million.

For this reason the networking or advanced neural programming of any VI system is strictly prohibited. Research into artificial intelligence programming is prohibited. Private contracting for research and military purposes is allowed only if the stated goal is to learn how to better combat and eliminate such intelligences.

Another threat VIs pose is also presented by the Quarian Genocide. With VI systems controlling all aspects life, their corruption or manipulation leaves the entire galactic population at risk much like the quarian people. New VI products are to be rigorously tested for defects in hardware, firmware, or software. A business found to be selling faulty VIs could face penalties equivalent to attempted murder if the corresponding VI had the potential to be lethal if erroneous or corrupted. VI systems that are malfunctioning are to be treated with extreme caution as their programming becomes unpredictable. With control to vital systems their potential for havoc and destruction is immense. Many local authorities employ teams of emergency first responders skilled and trained to neutralize and safely deactivate faulty VIs before they can harm the public.

* * *

><p>Codex Entry: Sky Vehicles

Sky Vehicles are atmospheric VTOL capable vehicles used for private and commercial use. The vehicles are made in a variety of models by an assortment of manufacturers across the galaxy, but the general structure and design remain the same.

The vehicles generate a lowered mass effect field and are guided by vectored thrusters. Their sleek and stylish design is meant to be more than aesthetically pleasing as they are aerodynamic to reduce drag at higher speeds. Power is supplied by a element zero core and micro fusion reactor or high capacity fuel cells located in an enclosed rear 'engine' compartment. Internal cabin compartments are

typically vacuum sealed and spacious with climate control and comfortable seats. The vehicle's controls are entirely haptic, with VI function that manages the operation, diagnostics, data and entertainment suites. When wishing to engage the high speed mode, a driver will relinquish control to the VI who is authorized to perform said functions.

The models fall into several categories but can be lumped into larger classifications. A single or tandem seater are narrow and small vehicles commonly referred to as sky bikes. These vehicles have exceptional maneuvering and high end speed capabilities due to their light mass and large thrusters but are heavily regulated to prevent accidents caused by user error. Because of the smaller and narrower size of the vehicle, the internal cabin is particularly cramped, with the driver and rear passenger force to lean forward. This limits the ability of the driver and passenger to perform other functions when the VI has control of operations. Additionally, there are only small side storage compartments, making this type of vehicle a poor choice for transporting anything but the driver, passenger, and personal belongings.

Sports and patrol style vehicles are slim two seaters that place the driver and one passenger adjacent to one another. The vehicle's primary draw is it's speed and maneuvering, which is comparable to single and tandem seaters, but with drastically increased cabin space allowing normal upright seating. Still it lacks storage compartments for transporting goods and material aside from the passengers. These vehicles are seen as both impractical and desired status symbols because of these limitations and advantages. Law enforcement uses these models as patrol cars and the wealthy use them as private transportation. Higher end models often have the most experimental internal luxury features found in all sky vehicles. Law enforcement models come equipped with a small compartment for storing additional weapons and gear.

Sedans are the predominant models, creating the baseline standard for sky vehicles. They balance speed, maneuvering, cabin space, storage space, and comprehensive interactive and entertainment suites. Typically they can comfortably seat a driver and four to five additional passengers as well boasting a large rear storage compartment that is accessible from both the interior cabin and external hatches. Both manually and automated driven taxis use this model to provide the most function and adaptability for passengers. Some higher end models separate the internal cabin into two separate compartments complete with separate entertainment and data suites to provide comfort and privacy to rear passengers.

Shuttles are much larger vehicles that trade speed and handling for power and size. These function as mass transit and are typically owned and operated by local governments, capable of ferrying two or even three dozen passengers around cities, municipalities, and even long distance. The driver sits in an enclosed compartment near the front, monitoring systems and passengers while the VI controls actual operations. Passengers are seated throughout the rear compartment and capable of having limited access to the data and entertainment suites onboard via their personal devices. Depending upon the system set up, fares are pay as you go, monthly surcharge, or automatically free of charge for local tax paying citizens.

Haulers are more cumbersome transports that function in two different

ways. Sky freighters are a modular system similar to locomotives that involves a powerful vehicle with minimal mass capable of seating only the driver. The rear of the vehicle physically and magnetically locks with a chain of skids or pads that possess their own element zero cores and thrusters but no driver. The skids are loaded with material and containers which are locked down with physical and magnetic restraints. The VI for the sky freighter then controls the entire train of vehicles as one, moving them along from destination to destination. As with shuttles, the driver is there solely to observe and monitor while the VI performs the operations. Additionally, sky freighters are equipped with a series of assistance drones which can be used to repair or adjust any part of the train of vehicles while in flight to prevent accidents or damage to transported goods.

The second form of hauler are barges. Similar in design to the skids, barges are large flat slow moving surfaces with element zero cores and thrusters but possess a driver's compartment. Also like the sky freighter, the VI controls not only the vehicle, but a several drones used to aid in operations and safety. They are used to transport large amounts of goods and people over short distances. They are typically found in large cities where they link between the upper levels of massive skyscrapers, transport goods and passengers from waterbound space tether bases, and perform as industrial sized elevators. In more exotic instances, similar barge structures are used in entertainment settings such as concerts, amusement parks, outdoor dining, tourism, and sporting events.

The variety and function of sky vehicles is reflective of galactic society and it's needs and wants. Designs of urban environments takes into account this technology by accommodating sky vehicle drop off and parking garages at higher levels as well as placing approved sky lanes between the skyscrapers themselves. However this technology has not completely supplanted conventional terrestrial vehicles due to costs. Element zero is excessively high priced, making vehicles that use it expensive. Additional costs come in the form of power consumption, with the price of He3 and high capacity fuel cell recharging driving up the operational costs of sky vehicles. Unless there is a desired need for high end speed and VTOL capability, terrestrial vehicles are more economical, dependable and capable of hauling larger loads. There are also ethical considerations, with hanar, elcor and volus advocacy groups pointing out that the overwhelming majority of sky vehicle designs favor sapients with similar height, upright bipedal structure and two fully functional arms.

* * *

><p>Codex Entry: Military Vocational CodeRank**

The human military force, UNSC, employs a comprehensive rank, occupational, and proficiency identification system that is universal across all branches. The chain of command in the human military is dependent upon ranking, rating, official leadership positions and time in service to dictate authority.

The services are first delineated between enlisted, warrant and commissioned status for ranking. The commissioned are officers who have graduated from military proficiency and leadership courses at the UNSC Officer Academy, have a degree in a specific discipline, and possess a high level of operational experience and/or knowledge in a

particular field. Enlisted ranks are made of young humans who join immediately after completing standard human education levels. They possess no experience or specialized training and are instead given introductory education in military proficiency at UCMT, or Unified Combined Military Training, and their military profession schools. As they advance in experience and skill they are placed into the enlisted leadership ranks of non commissioned officers. Warrant officers are enlisted who obtain highly refined or specialized training allowing them to perform in the capacity of a commissioned officer under a narrow scope of operations. Typically this series of rank is awarded to enlisted in the fields of piloting, engineering, special operations, and military intelligence.

Next comes the rating scheme of MVC, or military vocational code. The MVC is a two symbol code based upon the human Latin alphabet and Arabic numeral systems. The first symbol in the code is one of the 26 standard Latin alphabet letters which correspond with a general military discipline. The second symbol in the code is an Arabic numeral ranging from one through seven. This corresponds with the proficiency attained in the aforementioned general military discipline. These disciplines and proficiency ratings are assigned through education at specialized schools run at several locations throughout Systems Alliance space. Initial recruits attend these introductory MVC courses after completing their UCMT course. Graduation from the introductory MVC courses grants the human their MVC at the level 1 proficiency. At later points in their career they will be invited to return to these schools for more advanced training pertaining to their military discipline. Graduation from each successive course increases the proficiency rating until reaching level 7 which is typically reserved for highly skilled specialists and field or flag rated officers.

Additional identifiers known as MVI, or military vocational identifiers, are assigned to personnel files to augment the rank and MVC identification system by indicating specialized schooling, unique skills, leadership courses, and cross training. These use a similar system to MVC code, only the MVI reverses and alters the scheme with the Arabic numeral identifying proficiency coming first followed by two Latin letters identifying the discipline. As a result of MVC training and experience, such identifiers and levels of proficiency are required for promotion, graduation, and assignments.

Finally additional identifiers are assigned denoting individual permanent callsigns, time in service, and specific awards.

****UNSC Military Vocational Codes****

- A- Administrative/Training
- B- Infantry, Light
- C- Infantry, Mechanized
- D- Infantry, Armor/Artillery
- E- Engineer, Vehicle Maintenance/Repair
- F- Engineer, Power/Propulsion Systems
- G- Engineer, Combat Support

H- Engineer, Support Systems
I- Engineer, VI Systems
J- Medical, Emergency/General
K- Medical, Specialist
L- Operations, Fire Control/Weapon Systems
M- Operations, Pilot Systems
N- Operations, Special Warfare
O- Operations, Aerospace Systems
P- Operations, VARCBN Warfare/Defense
Q- Operations, Remote Combat Systems
R- Operations, Electronic Warfare/Defense Systems
S- Operations, Sensory Systems
T- Operations, Information/Telecom Systems
U- Applied/Theoretical Sciences
V- Judge Advocate/Legal Services
W- Military Police/Security
X- Military Intelligence/Counterintelligence
Y- Civil/Public Affairs
Z- Logistics/Quartermaster

****UNSC Military Vocational Identifiers****

P/MA- Pilot/Maintenance, A/X Craft
P/MB- Pilot/Maintenance, Civilian Vehicle
P/MC- Pilot/Maintenance, Exoskeleton
P/MD- Pilot/Maintenance, FTL Vessel
P/ME- Pilot/Maintenance, Heavy Armor
P/MF- Pilot/Maintenance, IFV
W/OA- Weapons/Ordnance, Infantry
W/OB- Weapons/Ordnance, Vehicle Systems/Fire Control
W/OC- Weapons/Ordnance, Demolitions
W/OD- Weapons/Ordnance, Marksmanship

EA- Expertise, Security Clearance

EB- Expertise, Hand to Hand

EC- Expertise, Professional Leadership Training

ED- Expertise, Personal Armor Systems

EE- Expertise, Terrestrial Navigation

EF- Expertise, Intelligence/Counterintelligence Operations

EE- Expertise, Biotic Warfare

EG- Expertise, Infiltration/Stealth

EH- Expertise, Astronavigation

EI- Expertise, Hostile Environment Survival

EJ- Expertise, Unconventional Warfare Operations/Defense

EK- Expertise, UNSC Code of Military Justice

EL- Expertise, Policing/Investigation

EM- Expertise, Civil Affairs Operations

EN- Expertise, Public Affairs Operations

EO- Expertise, Psychological Operations

EP- Expertise, Advanced Insertion Operations

ER- Expertise, Xeno Expertise Specialty

ES- Expertise, Terrestrial Tactics/Strategy

ET- Expertise, A/X Tactics/Strategy

SA- Systems, Tactical Sensory Management

SB- Systems, Advanced Sensory Management

SC- Systems, Fabrication Generation/Management

SD- Systems, Signal Processing Generation/Management

SE- Systems, Facilities Management

SF- Systems, Power Generation/Management

SG- Systems, Mass Effect/Slipstream Generation/Management

SH- Systems, Propulsion Generation/Management

SI- Systems, VI/Automation Management

SL- Systems, Mechanical Management

SM- Systems, Programming/Information Generation/Management

SN- Systems, Nanotechnology Generation/Management

MA- Medical, Emergency Technician

MB- Medical, General Disciplines

MC- Medical, Augmentation Disciplines

MD- Medical, Recovery/Therapy Disciplines

ME- Medical, Psychiatric Disciplines

MF- Medical, Xenobiology

****UNSC Military Rank****

****Enlisted****

E1 â€" Recruit [All Branches]

E2 â€" Private, Second Grade [Army, Marines]; Crewman, Second Grade
[Air Force, Navy]

E3 â€" Private, First Grade [Army, Marines]; Crewman, First Grade
[Air Force, Navy]

E4 â€" Corporal [Army, Marines]; Specialist [Air Force, Navy]

E5 â€" Sergeant [Army, Marines]; Petty Officer [Air Force, Navy]

E6 â€" Staff Sergeant [Army, Marines]; Staff Petty Officer [Air
Force, Navy]

E7 â€" Chief Sergeant [Army, Marines]; Chief Petty Officer [Air
Force, Navy]

E8 â€" Master Sergeant/ First Sergeant (Command) [Army, Marines];
Master Petty Officer/First Petty Officer (Command) [Air Force,
Navy]

E9 â€" Sergeant Major/Command Sergeant Major (Command) [Army,
Marines]; Master Chief Petty Officer/Command Master Chief Petty
Officer (Command) [Air Force, Navy]

****Warrant****

W1 â€" Warrant Officer [All Branches]

W2 â€" Staff Warrant Officer [All Branches]

W3 â€" Chief Warrant Officer [All Branches]

W4 â€" Master Warrant Officer [All Branches]

W5 â€" Major Warrant Officer [All Branches]

****Commissioned****

01 â€" Lieutenant, Second Grade [Army, Marines]; Flight Lieutenant, Second Grade [Air Force, Navy]

02 â€" Lieutenant, First Grade [Army, Marines]; Flight Lieutenant, First Grade [Air Force, Navy]

03 â€" Captain [Army, Marines]; Lieutenant Commander [Air Force; Navy]

04 â€" Major [Army, Marines]; Commander [Air Force, Navy]

05 â€" Lieutenant Colonel [Army, Marines]; Wing Captain [Air Force, Navy]

06 â€" Colonel [Army, Marines]; Group Captain [Air Force, Navy]

07 â€" Brigadier [Army, Marines]; Commodore [Air Force, Navy]

08 â€" Lieutenant General [Army, Marines]; Vice Air Marshal [Air Force]; Vice Admiral [Navy]

09 â€" General [Army, Marines]; Air Marshal [Air Force]; Admiral [Navy]

010 â€" General of the Army [Army]; General of the Marines [Marines]; Marshal of the Air Force [Air Force]; Admiral of the Navy [Navy]; Director of Intelligence [ONI]

011 â€" Chief of UNSC Defense Forces [All Branches]

8. This One Time At MEPS

****AN:** I apologize profusely for the delay. The story needed a bit of work and preparation before I posted it because I'm not too fond of going back to edit published chapters. A great deal of thanks to the person who is helping me by reviewing my work. I owe you an incredible debt my friend.
>

****I** have several more chapters already done and waiting on editing and tweaking, but that process should be much more streamlined. Also look out for a separate story that should be posted sometime soon. It is a one shot companion piece to this story that I think some of you Halo fans might get a kick out of.******

****UNSC Serpent Nebula Military Entrance Processing Station, Zakera Ward, Citadel, Widow System, Serpent Nebula; June 18th, 2572 [Standardized Terran Calendar], 1417 [Local Time, Galactic Standard]****

This had easily been one of the most odd and unusual days of my life.

Actually, scratch that. The past few days had been the most odd and unusual period of my life. A part of me hoped this was a hazing prank being pulled on those of us enlisting today.

A really sick, disturbing, and intricately plotted hazing prank.

It had started with my trip here, which I was under the impression would be simple enough. The farewells with my family had been as uncomfortable as I expected with hugs, glares, kisses, tears, well wishes and awkward moments of silence exchanged. I had even managed to get a love tap upside Lizzy's head as I ran out the door. From there it was a quick trip to Milgrom with an Army Corporal who had all of the conversational skills and personality of a rock.

But I should have known my luck was going to be rotten from the start because my cabin on the transport was filled with a small collection of the worst people possible to share a six day trip from Boltzmann to Widow.

First and foremost were two of the most obnoxious kids in the galaxy and their ineffectual parents. I swear I will never complain about Ari's behavior ever again. Before the transport had even undocked from the orbital station their parents were pleading with their bratty spawn to sit down and behave.

Then there was this businesswoman, human, older and immaculately dressed, who regularly slipped into naps complete with ear rattling snoring. At first I thought she was just trying to piss everyone else off. I mean, why fall asleep in the cabin when you had a comfortable and individual pod in the sleeping quarters? In fact, how could you fall asleep in that cabin with the chaos? But somehow she did it. It was equal parts amazing and grating.

Then there was some turian guy who talked loudly during his seemingly never ending vidchats. Seriously, who had credits to burn on a slipspace extranet connection just so you could run your mouth off? When he wasn't busy acting like a tough guy making threats to business partners and clients he was having gossip rundowns with various people. I ended up learning more than I cared to know about people I would never meet. Like how Velvinna is sleeping with Pacata behind Kaeso's back but he's actually sleeping with an asari named Verusha and she might be pregnant.

Actually, on second thought, he might have been discussing a turian vid show.

The worst part was when he would actually shut up. Rather than head to the cafeteria for meals like most normal people, he opted to bring his food brought to the cabin where he would plow through it with loud slurps and the even more irritating chewing with his mouth open.

I'm still not sure if that was a turian or asshole thing. Maybe a little of both.

And as if it were possible, the worst out of the bunch was a fellow recruit who would not stop pestering me once he found out I was joining the UNSC as well.

Augustus Zuromskis had seemed like a nice guy at first. Funny and friendly, he said he was joining the Navy as communications specialist. The problems came when his annoying habit surfaced of talking loudly and frequently over the racket in the cabin about how much sex we were going to get wearing a UNSC uniform. Cue my mortification as everyone stopped what they were doing to listen

in.

When I made the mistake of correcting his assumption I was originally from Bekenstein he asked me what girls from the outer colonies were like. Then he proceeded to ask me if I had any sisters and if they were hot. It was at that point that I made the choice to ignore him. Choking someone to death on an interstellar transport tended to be frowned upon.

That hadn't work as I had planned. He proved to be capable of carrying on a conversation all by himself talking about the types of women he couldn't wait to sleep with. And he ran the gamut of the human experience in explicit detail. Body types. Skin tones. Hair colors. And then he moved on to xenos.

He even managed to piss off the crew members by engaging in a running commentary about which ones he would or wouldn't want to see naked. It's like they guy had no mental filter.

Upon arrival at our destination earlier today I nearly rushed out of the decontamination screening center and kissed the metal plates on the ground of the Citadel docking bay.

I say nearly because we were snatched in seconds by what had to be the twin of my driver back on Bekenstein. He hadn't bothered with greetings or even words. Just grunted and gestured for us to follow him to a skycar waiting outside and then drove us to a pretty nice hotel in the Zakera Ward a few levels away from the UNSC base on the Citadel, which also housed the Serpent Nebula MEPS. A quick check in was followed by Corporal Congeniality finally proving he had intact vocals chords by barking that we had ten minutes to get upstairs, drop our bags off in our shared room, and be back down in the lobby.

My first reaction had been to despair. I was being forced into sharing a room with 'Auggie', as he insisted his friends call him.

My second reaction was to panic over the amount of time given. Have you ever seen teenagers attempt to do anything organized? In a limited amount of time? It was a clusterfuck of epic proportions. Arriving in the lobby fifteen minutes later had earned us a scolding for the duration of our journey from the hotel to MEPS. Although, I did have to give the corporal credit for not running out of breath or repeating insults as he berated us.

Our arrival at MEPS brought on the sort of simple commands you give pet. Or a misbehaving child. Or a VI. Shut up. Sit here. Sign there. Stand in line. Don't you dare fall asleep. All that was missing was roll over, fetch, lights on, go to your room, and stop bothering your sister.

Auggie and I were just two out of a group of over two dozen enlisting today. Most were from the Citadel or Bekenstein. A handful grew up on ships where their parents worked. There were few from the secessionist or unincorporated Terminus colonies of Venezia, Zorya, and Anhur. One was even from as far away as Omega. Young men and women representing every shade, size, and walk of life humanity came in. Colonists. Spacers. Some Systems Alliance citizens. Some not. All just as nervous as I was to be joining the UNSC.

After the initial flurry of processing activity we were herded into a small waiting area with pale green walls, super uncomfortable chairs, bright lighting, and a vid display playing only ANN the whole damn time. Everyone was quiet and kept to themselves. If my own feelings and thoughts were anything to go by, then everyone was nervous and unsure of what to do or say around such a large group of people we had nothing in common with. Well, besides all being human and entering military service.

Breaking up the monotony was when some of the people born outside of Systems Alliance space were taken to process their provisional citizenship. The big highlight was when one of those creepy green Keepers waddled into the room in it's silent and unexpected way to rearrange a row of seats. It paid us no attention as it went about it's pointless task of swapping seats in the back row so everything looked as it did previously before exiting as nonchalantly as it had entered.

The novelty, and shock, of the experience served to be the best tension breaker. Those who lived on the Citadel or had visited before retold past experiences with Keepers, or even wild theories on what purpose they served. I got a mix of laughs and understanding nods when I told them how as children my sister Lizzy would hide behind our parents whenever near a Keeper and Ari would have to be restrained to prevent her from touching one.

Once that topic was finished we began sharing our anxious thoughts and ideas about what was in store for us. Some couldn't wait to begin handling military grade weapons or piloting the various war machines of the UNSC. Others were simply overwhelmed by what was to come, having never been far from home before. All of us wondered how tough UCMT would be and if the instructors were really as mean as vids portrayed them.

Then we were collected to finalize our processing with a medical exam and that was when the real fun began. We had been lead as a group through the winding corridors of the processing center into a large empty room and told to strip. Naturally we all balked at the command, which earned us a new round of reprimands and insistence that we get used to having very little privacy because the UNSC has zero concerns about our modesty.

I joined the rest in slowly removing my clothes, careful to stare at the floor and mindful of the rustling sounds of others doing the same. Once divested of our clothes it was a psychological game of how not to be the first person to openly check every one out. I focused on staring at a spot above the shoulder of the redhead standing across from me and not on anything below her collar. I also tried desperately to ignore how cold it was in the room, fighting of the urge to shiver or shift my feet around in an attempt to stay warm.

The humorless medical technicians and doctors walked down the lines giving us a visual inspection and using their drones to scan us for verification of our identitag records and current medical status. Then one by one we were subjected to some of the most ridiculous medical examinations known to man or any other species. I mean seriously, what the fuck is a duck walk and why is it important I be able to do it naked in a room full of strangers? If that wasn't bad

enough, the poking, prodding, and scanning of every square centimeter of my person, including orifices, in a room full of other people was just flat out humiliating.

As the degrading activities continued, neither myself or my redheaded counterpart across from me did a very good job controlling the impulse to look around. My own eyes drifted down her shapely figure, taking in the fact she was freckled everywhere and very much a natural redhead before I quickly realized what I was doing and looked away. I had felt bad about it until I caught her gray eyes drifting south a few times in my direction only for her to come to the same shocked realization of what she was doing. The first time it happened she made eye contact to see if I had noticed, which I had, before she looked away with wide and fearful eyes. Amusingly, I learned her face could turn almost as red as her hair when embarrassed.

Once the the exam was finished, or the doctors had their fill of sadistic amusement, we were given a set of blue coveralls to wear, told to collect our belongings, and head back to the waiting room.

And so here I am. On the Citadel. About to be officially sworn into the UNSC. Tired, hungry, numb, and in a room with my fellow recruits who had been exposed and violated as well. Every one of us was back to being silent and avoiding eye contact again as yet another ANN program droned on in the background.

Is this sort of thing normal in the UNSC?

What had I gotten myself into? This was a mistake. A huge mistake.

Finally a small Asian woman, Lan I think was her name, asked aloud what we were all thinking. "Does this mean we're all going to be naked around each other all the time? Like, have to shower together?"

The seal of silence in the room broken once more, we all nervously looked at one another with wide, fearful eyes. That was definitely not something included on the brochure but in retrospect should have been assumed.

"There's going to be more girls in UCMT, right? Some better looking ones?" This time I didn't bother to resist my natural urge to facepalm at Auggie's question. And the majority of the females present didn't bother holding back on their urge to send him death glares either. A young woman with light brown hair sitting beside him looked as if she were contemplating using her fists to answer his question.

As blindly stupid as his question was it did get me thinking about Ari's teasing. _'Maybe the UNSC would help you get a girlfriend.'_ How pitiful is that now in light of what happened today? Not counting medical professionals, the first woman to see me naked was standing across from me during a military examination and her response was to look away before going red in the face.

Unconsciously my eyes swept the room until they stopped again on the redhead in question. I'm pretty sure I remember someone saying her name was Ilyse. She was lost in her thoughts, gazing absently into

the distance as pink lips nervously nibbled on her right thumb. Feeling a bit more bold this time around I took the opportunity to observe her in detail. Straight dark red hair cut to shoulder length with neon green highlights. Pale peach colored skin with freckles across her defined cheeks and the bridge of her pert nose. They were even present on her slim neck as it plunged down into the collar of her coveralls where I knew she had more freckles all over her shoulders, arms and chest. Which naturally drew my attention to what else I knew she had under those coveralls.

For the second time today I caught my self staring at her chest and quickly broke my trance. I reflexively looked to see if she had noticed and was met with those piercing and beautiful gray eyes looking back at me curiously. We stared at one another for a moment longer than is normal before her eyes drifted down my frame. She made a show of looking me back in the eyes before looking away with another bright red blush.

Um, okay. Well, at least our pattern was set now. There was no way either of us could look at the other and not be reminded of being naked in front of each other.

I folded my arms and shifted in my seat, staring at the floor between my feet. Today was turning out to be so weird. This entire trip was. Not necessarily bad, like my final days on Mindoir. Nothing could top that in the terrible events of my life department. But definitely weird and it was playing havoc on my mind.

Sneaking another glance at Ilyse I recalled how Wajiha had flirted with me and how that had all turned out. Flexing and squeezing my right hand into a fist, I remembering how the broken bones there had throbbed once the adrenaline had worn off. That brought back memories of the yelling and arguing with my grandparents later that night.

Blowing out a breath in frustration at the memories I figured maybe this was my lot in life. To have awkward encounters with women on horrible and embarrassing days of my life.

Trying to distract myself from negative thoughts I focused on immersing myself with whatever was on the vid display in the room.

"_Ministry of Intelligence and Investigations Director for Earth's Australia division called yesterday's raid on industrial centers in Perth a huge step forward in combating crime across the planet and Sol system. Information released with the press conference details that although the illegal and untraceable weapons were fabricated, assembled and shipped from the Freemantle district to be sold to street gangs or organized crime organizations, the parts and software programming matches similar weapons seized in the past that have been believed to have originated from FRM hackers on the human secessionist colony Venezia in the Nemean Abyss of the Terminus. If the trend follows, this seizure of nearly four thousand weapons and suspected nearly quadruple that in sales over the past decade would constitute the largest violation of Citadel and Systems Alliance laws on the proliferation and regulation of weaponry since the infamous 2549 raid of the Aquino fabrication assembly facility in the city of Scott on Terra Nova during the Second Insurrection War. No word has been given if the Council or Council Spectres have been brought in on

the investigation."_

After one galactic standard hour and two really shitty ANN programs my mind was turned to mush. All I could process or even remember is that no one knew how long it would take the neural cybernetics industry in Systems Alliance space to fully recover from the announced bankruptcy of Conatix and if Eff Tee El would have to cancel his tour dates in Asari Republic space after his latest music vid portrayed him dry humping statues of Siari goddesses. Thankfully I didn't need to watch anymore of the news when an Air Force Specialist dropped in to tell us it was time for our swearing in. He lead us down several more winding corridors until we reached a small conference room cleared of all furniture except for a small dais with two flags: The Systems Alliance and UNSC.

Again we were left to wait and I'm sure everyone was thinking the same thing I was. What sort of unnecessary hazing prank were they going to pull this time? I was examining the room, trying to figure out if there was a clue to what was to come, when I felt someone brush up against my left side. I bit down on a groan, figuring it was Auggie and he wanted to continue his annoying conversation, but when I turned my head to glare at him I saw that it was Ilyse. It could have been just random chance, but when she looked at me it was with a bashful smile which caused my stomach to flutter and palms to start sweating. The glare on my face melted away into a confused frown and stood there like an idiot staring at her gray eyes and cute freckled face. Every breath and heartbeat seemed so much stronger than anything I had felt before and I wasn't sure why. Maybe it was because I was anticipating some sort of new and embarrassing event courtesy of our hosts. Maybe it was just nerves being next to an attractive woman who has seen me naked and is still willing to get within ten meters of me. Maybe it was the fact that any second now I was about to be sworn into the UNSC as a Marine. Or maybe it was all three.

I didn't have to wait very long to figure out what it was because the entrance to the conference room opened and a dark skinned man in a midnight blue uniform trimmed with gold and decorated with all sorts of badges and medals marched in, "Stand at attention for the officer entering the room, recruits!"

Of course, none of us knew what that meant but instinctively we all stood tall and stiff, like a gaggle of terrified statues facing different directions. Behind the man was another, deeply tanned and wearing a similarly impressive uniform, who nodded and smiled in thanks for the announcement of his presence. Tall and powerfully built, the both of them, they stalked and weaved their way through us like apex predators us towards the dais. Once there the darker skinned man stood to the side, his hands behind his back and cold stare scanning the room.

The officer centered himself in front, silently examining us all with hooded eyes before nodding at something to his liking. My eyes were drawn to the medals and rank on his uniform, trying to figure out what any of them meant. An unexpected and surprisingly loud clap of his hands was followed by his thunderous exclamation that almost echoed in the small room. "Outstanding!"

I flinched, caught unaware and fearful that a new round of terror was about to begin, which is the reaction I think he wanted to get. But,

with our attention focused and nerves sufficiently frayed, he mellowed and spoke in a softer but still commanding tone. "At ease, recruits. Gather around and take a knee."

Cautiously we moved into a semicircle around the officer and knelt as ordered. When he was satisfied that our movement had ceased he introduced himself, "Good afternoon, my name is Lieutenant Colonel Giancarlo McCabe, UNSC Marines. I want to take this moment to thank you all for being here today and having the courage to make this life changing decision."

"I am going to conduct your swearing in but before I do that I'd like to speak at length about tradition and how this relates to each of you." He began pacing, his hands behind his back, staring down at each of us as he spoke with passion about what it meant to be in the UNSC while we listened with rapt attention.

"The United Nations Space Command dates back some 400 years to an era some call World War Three or the Solar War. Historians call it the Interplanetary War." Pausing in his speech, his tone and demeanor became more dark. "We humans have never had a good track record with tolerance or peace. We like to talk about our great achievements, but in order to appreciate them you must also acknowledge our failures. Our history is littered with them. Greed. Slavery. Aggression. Exploitation. Domination. Genocide. Left unsupervised we can and will repeat this history."

"We had altered and poisoned our planet, our home, for greed and profit. We had overpopulated it through carelessness and apathy. It had gotten to the point that episodes of famine and drought were common in the supposed First World. Economies of the mightiest of nations sputtered and breathed their dying gasps, leaving the majority of their populations as destitute as their supposed Third World brethren." The Lieutenant Colonel stopped his pacing and glared to emphasize his point. "A terrible situation, not just from an ethical point of view, but from a practical standpoint as well. If there is anything you remember from this speech and the lessons of that era, then remember that desperate people are dangerous. They are the driving force of our history. We will not accept change unless we are forced to. And then we will do anything."

None of this was exactly new information to me. Every human child in Systems Alliance space was taught the history of how our race nearly exterminated ourselves. But none of my teachers had been as passionate a storyteller as this Marine officer. It was difficult not to be enraptured as he carried on. "It began as revolts and uprisings against government leadership that were brutally suppressed but it was too late. The spark of desperation had been lit. The volatile mixture of poverty, hunger, and fear was like tinder. Petty distinctions based on arbitrary things like nationality, ethnicity, religion, or political ideology were used to justify the heinous actions of the terrified and desperate. The former United States fell to a second civil war that soon spread to engulf their entire continent. The Russians and Chinese slugged it out over resources and pride across Asia, Mars and Luna. South America experienced a backlash against corrupt governments that fueled a massive socialist movement pitting neighbor against neighbor. Europe, Africa and Asia sunk into anarchy as their masses revolted once much needed resources and trade from a global economy stopped flowing. Our first colonies throughout the Solar system that were run by joint national and

corporate sponsorship used the distance and anarchy on Earth as an opportunity seize their own sovereignty. Overnight the once free colonists and workers had no recourse to escape and were forced to fight for dwindling supplies once shipments from Earth ceased."

"In this hour of darkness it seemed inevitable that humanity would finish the job we had started centuries ago. We would finally destroy ourselves. Either fission and biological weapons would fall into the hands of someone insane enough to use them or we would ravage ourselves and the planet just to be the last man standing in a world where there was nothing left to fight for. Our combined history of tens of thousands of years as a species, the very civilization that our ancestors and their ancestors and their ancestors before them had poured their lives into would all come to a bloody and inglorious end." His pacing had carried him towards the flags and he touched the UNSC one, fingering the fringe slightly. When he continued this time, he spoke more reverently, "And so it fell to a small group of peacekeepers assigned to a refugee camp in Brazil to crush this insanity. To not let our species go willingly into the night. Most of them were refugees themselves, scared, starving, and separated from their loved ones as the world around them descended into madness. They conscripted those willing to fight and turned them into the force that would bring our species back from the brink of self imposed extinction. It would take several years and more senseless bloodshed, but they achieved peace and brought the entire Solar system under the banner of one government to better facilitate rehabilitation and ease old wounds. "

Releasing his grasp on the flag, he marched back to the center of the room and stood tall and proud, like the flag had gifted him strength. "Since that fateful time the human race has seen incredible advancements and remarkable discoveries. The Prothean Archives on Mars and the Charon Relay unlocking the mysteries of mass effect and slipstream physics while answering the question if we were alone in this galaxy. Which in turn gave us the tools to leave our home and marked the beginning of our colonization amongst the stars. That lead to the formation of our current government, the Systems Alliance. But it hasn't always been about going where no man has gone before. The UNSC has stood firm all these centuries because we will always remember the price nearly paid for our careless and reckless past."

As he began recounting the enemies the UNSC had fought since the Interplanetary War his voice rose, almost in indignation. "Insurrectionists and Secessionists who twice now have made it clear they didn't like the way things were run so they thought violence and mass murder of their fellow humans were legitimate forms of protest. Turians who welcomed us on behalf of the Galactic Council with mass accelerated slugs, orbital bombardments, and death squads. Batarians who show us neighborly love by constantly engaging in border disputes. The Covenant who spout their religious nonsense and perform their genocidal form of worship against any who they find in their path. And lawless Terminus pirates and mercenaries who seem to think that everything, and anyone, is fair game to be stolen and sold."

"It can not be any more clear, recruits. The need for the UNSC has never been greater. We face constant threats, internal and external, to the legacy and continued survival of the human race. And each of you represent the next brave generation of soldiers, marines,

sailors, and airmen who have heeded the call. The fate of our race, of your brothers and sisters, rests on your shoulders now." My upbringing had never been very spiritual or religious, but I'm pretty sure the way the Lieutenant Colonel was speaking could be referred to as a religious experience. And it was infectious. His fervor focused as he ended his speech. "Man the gates, warriors of humanity, as those who have worn the uniform before you have done. Do not let their sacrifices have been in vain. Do not let the sacrifices of the entire human race to get us to this point have been in vain. Defend Earth. Defend Humanity. At any cost."

A surge of pride coursed through my veins, overriding my previous melancholy and fear that I had made the wrong choice. I was part about to become part of a legacy that has guided and defended humanity for centuries. I would do my part to make sure another Shanxi, or Harvest, or Mindoir, would never happen again. No one should have to go through what Ari and I did.

Still, as a blinding and intoxicating brew bathed every fiber of my being in a jingoistic euphoria, the cynical voice in the back of my head remarked, _'And who defends humanity and Earth from the Systems Alliance and UNSC? This was all just very well performed propaganda.'_

Nevertheless, when he ordered us to rise and raise our right hands I did so immediately. Eagerly. And when he told us to repeat the words of the UNSC Oath after him, I did so with conviction and thundering heartbeat.

I was a UNSC Marine now. I would defend humanity. At any cost.

* * *

><p>Presidium, Citadel, Widow System, Serpent Nebula; June 18th, 2572 [Standardized Earth Calendar], 1694 [Local Time]

"Then wouldn't it occur to you to inform the Primarch's staff that we will not be able to address this issue until Ambassador Goyle has an opportunity to speak with the Prime Minister?"

Normally taking calls and vidchats during a meal was considered the height of rudeness in our family unless it was an emergency. My grandparents had zero tolerance for it. That had translated into my mother having zero tolerance for it. And I was pretty sure the same went for my Tia Alicia if her snarky handling of this call was anything to go by. "Right. Now I suggest you acquaint yourself with the definition of urgent or find yourself a new line of work. Wonderful. Delete my omni address and have brilliant night off."

She ended the call by reaching up to the earpiece built into golden feathered serpent ear cuff she wore and tapping it in disgust. Draining the deep burgundy remnants of her wine glass in one gulp she raised her manicured left hand and gestured to the restaurant staff that she needed a refill.

We were seated at a corner table in Hurasham, one of the high end restaurants on the Presidium that catered to a clientele with credits to spare. She and my Tio Kamal had arrived at the hotel to pick me up for a congratulatory dinner and last hurrah before I was shipped of

to boot camp.

After the swearing in I had been herded with the rest of the group back to our hotel with orders to stay on the premises until it was time to board our transports to UCMT facilities on Reach, Earth or Benning tomorrow morning. First call would be in the lobby at 0500 local time in the coveralls issued to us today with bags packed to begin the check out process with the hotel and then movement back to the UNSC military base.

'Use common sense' was the only real advice we were given on how to conduct ourselves for the rest of the night. We were free to do whatever we wanted provided we did not leave the hotel, kicked out of the hotel, or do anything that would lead to C-Sec arresting us.

So of course with our block of rooms all on the same floor it became a bit of a party. What else did you expect from a group of teenagers and twenty somethings who knew they were spending their last night as civilians?

I was hesitant at first to accept the invitation to join my aunt and uncle for dinner when they called me, but at the first utterance from my roommate about getting some sex workers to celebrate I had changed my mind. People watching at a restaurant with my relatives was a vastly superior option to whatever the hell Auggie had in mind.

Plus it had been mildly humorous to see the surly Corporal from before get a dressing down from an ONI officer and Systems Alliance Diplomat when he tried to tell them they didn't have the authority to remove me from the hotel.

And that is how I found myself down in the restaurant enjoying a meal of grilled chicken with salarian spices and some mixed veggies. Not the greatest meal I've ever had, and certainly not for the price, but not the worst and on the plus side none of it was vat grown. Well, as far as I could tell. None of it was fresh, that much I was certain of, but I suppose that made sense. This was a space station and even as large as it was there were limits to how self sufficient it was. Everything had to be shipped in from all corners of the galaxy, including food. That meant at least a week or so of travel time to get real fresh food from planets with enough food production to support their populations and still have enough to sell a sizable amount on the galactic market. And with the bulk of human food supplies staying inside of Systems Alliance space the scarcity and prices were jacked up out here in the Serpent Nebula.

Which reminded me of yet another reason why Bekenstein was such an obnoxious and expensive place to live.

Tio Kamal, clad in his midnight blue UNSC dress uniform with gold trim, reclined back in his seat and regarded his wife's behavior with a slight smirk on his clean shaven face. "Has the Ambassador's Block managed the crisis in your absence and averted being burned to the ground?"

Tuning out their conversation I glanced out the window nearby at the hustle and bustle of the Presidium. The handful of times I had come to the Citadel had been for visits to see the relatives I was seated with currently or as a layover before heading to Bekenstein to visit my grandparents. Observing the variety of people going about their

day brought back memories of how awestruck I was to see the Citadel for the first time at five years old. We had made the journey to introduce Ari to the family when she was just shy of a year old but my first experience was almost like stepping into another galaxy and it was easy to still feel that way even now.

Having grown up on Mindoir, with it's largely homogeneous human population, I'd rarely ever seen a xeno in person outside of the occasional visitor to the colony. Not that an upbringing like that was particularly unique or unheard of. Sure there was overlap between species and tourism across the galaxy on major planets with people of all races attracted to the large cities and cultural hotspots in the galaxy, but despite the ease of travel and shared galactic civilization, most races kept to their own clusters and colonies. You just didn't come into everyday contact with different races unless you were looking to do so. In fact, Matron Malegos was by far the xeno that I had spent the most time with ever.

But that wasn't the case for a place like the Citadel. Just the next table over an elcor, volus and hanar were conversing over drinks and dinner like it was perfectly normal and not the setup for a terrible joke. Which I guess it was. I was the odd one out. A teenage human gawking at the everyday normal reality of races living together like it was a spectacle.

Tia Alicia's weary sigh brought my attention back to my relatives. Still dressed in her business attire for the day, a fashionable slate gray pantsuit with an amethyst dress shirt, she looked every bit the powerful member of the Systems Alliance Diplomatic Corps she was. Rolling her eyes at her husband's remark and drumming her fingers on the table, she responded, "I don't know who is handling the applicants for our internships and aide positions back on Arcturus, but I get the feeling they find the ideal candidate to be the most socially challenged dimwit possible."

He chuckled softly in response, slightly shaking his head in exasperation and smoothing out his uniform as a drone arrived to refill wine glasses. I'd barely touched my own so I waved off the drone as my uncle lifted his now full glass to his lips and raised a taunting eyebrow at his wife, "Could this possibly be related to your taunting Marcus during last year's conference about his wife's indiscretions? He does have input over hiring for all branches, including the Diplomatic Corps."

She retorted by narrowing her eyes at her husband's suggestion and grunting, "Please. I was only stating the obvious. He and his wife have an open relationship. The blame can't be laid at my feet because she is able to take far more advantage of that than her miserable excuse for a husband, now can it?"

This time my Tio Kamal threw his head back and laughed out loud, raising his glass in salute to his wife and smiling at her charmingly, "Of course not, love. How foolish of me to think that he might be misinterpreting that as taunting and seek revenge. Forgive me?"

Her own glass joined his in toast as she smiled back with just as much charm and affection, "Forgiven."

They both seemed to have forgotten I was present as they became lost

in their own private world, drinking in wine and each others presence with continued eye contact. Deciding I'd heard enough gossip from that Turian on the transport over the past few days I opted to give them a private moment. I chewed on another mouthful of veggies and glanced around the restaurant again. My eyes were drawn to a large table at the rear of the restaurant and the tough looking crowd seated there. A loud and boisterous group of humans, turians, asari, and a krogan dressed in the latest high end fashion. Frowning to myself I wondered what sort of illicit business they were involved in to be able to afford to dine here and dress like that. They didn't exactly fit the look of professional corporate types.

The lone krogan, seated at the head of the table, noticed my gaze lingering on his group for too long and returned it with a dead eye stare of his own. His expensive looking suit and the posh atmosphere of the restaurant, with the soft strains of salarian classical music playing in the background, belied the chilling way he made a show of slicing into the hunk of meat on his plate while maintaining eye contact. Like he was suggesting what he wanted to do with me.

Succumbing to the impulse that had been disturbingly frequent today, I quickly looked away. So much for my start as some fearless UNSC Marine.

Tia Alicia cleared her throat to get my attention, making me realize that she been trying to talk to me while my mind was elsewhere. She looked over her shoulder to glance where my gaze had been drawn earlier and turned back around with a sour look of revulsion on her face as she grumbled, "I didn't realize we'd be breathing the same air as that bastard and his pack of animals. I would have worn a rebreather."

Her husband glanced in the direction and locked eyes with the krogan, who snarled and tried to look intimidating before losing the contest of wills, forcing him to look away.

Okay. That was impressive.

"How did you do that?" I blurted out before I could even think to censor myself.

Kamal looked my way with a raised eyebrow and slight grin, "Thax Vorak is a bully with half a brain. He knows how to make credits off of people terrified of the whole big, bad krogan act. But if he was half as dangerous as he likes to make himself out to be he'd be a warlord back on Tuchanka or out in the Terminus. Instead he hides here on the Citadel and on Illium where people believe the hype."

"Well, before we were so rudely interrupted by the local wildlife, I asked how you're doing? Excited? Nervous?" Tia Alicia leaned forward on her elbows with a large and eager smile, placing her chin in her left hand and making me the center of the discussion with her questions. I was oddly reminded of how my Tia could switch flawlessly between her normally upbeat personality and the stern no nonsense senior diplomatic adviser to the human ambassador on cultural affairs. There was also a hint of where the subtle mannerisms and behavior my cousin Linda displayed were inherited.

I didn't answer at first, not sure how I was feeling and shrinking back a bit from their combined attention. Today had been overwhelming. A mixture of emotions and concerns. But it was over. All I had to do was board the transport tomorrow morning.

Shrugging my shoulders hopelessly, I looked at her with a half smile and expression that I hoped conveyed how confused I was. Her response was to narrow her eyes, hum a displeased tone, and quirk her lips to the side in annoyance at my non answer.

Tio Kamal's response, however, was to nod as if he understood exactly what I meant and resume eating his meal. Between a mouthful he used his fork to gesture to my own plate with a bit of wisdom, "Whatever you do, finish your meal. You're not going to have another one like it for quite some time." At my shocked expression he nodded solemnly and grinned, "Trust me."

We all tucked in and continued eating our meals in silence. After a moment, and feeling a bit guilty at my inability to answer my aunt's question when she had sprung for this dinner just for me, I finished chewing and lamely asked, "So, uh, how are things?"

She paused in her own chewing to give me a raised eyebrow and slightly incredulous expression. Quickly following that up with a swig of wine to clear her mouth, she regarded me for a moment with a fond smirk before teasing me, "I see you're still lacking in those conversational skills. You are your mother's child."

Not even bothering to look up from his own meal, Kamal gently corrected his wife, "Retract your claws dear. What you're doing is what we refer to as friendly fire. And with kin, no less."

"He's fine. His mother was awkward at that age too and I'm sure his sisters tease him far worse than that." She frowned at her husband and gestured to his uniform, "Besides he's going to be a UNSC Marine. If he can't handle gentle ribbing from family then he's going to be in trouble."

This time he did pause, looking up at me and then back at his wife. Blinking once, he shrugged and nodded in acceptance, "Good point. I concede to your logic and withdraw my complaint."

She winked back at him over her wine glass and then reclined back in her seat to get comfortable. Her smile widened and she took on the role of a proud mother. "Well, to answer your question, things are going well. Your cousin Saman just graduated third in his class. He's going to spend the summer working an internship with Delta Pavonis in their colonial investment division on Arcturus. In the fall he'll start his post graduate work but for now he simply can not stop raving about all he's learning."

Nodding along, I slightly recalled hearing about that. Abuela and Abuelo had left for about two weeks almost a month ago to attend his graduation on Earth. It had been the one period of respite and peace for me once I had announced my intentions to join the UNSC. But I hadn't heard about the internship. That sounded cool, I guess. I mean, I had no clue what exactly it entailed but I had an inkling having grown up on a young colony. Chances are it meant he helped handle the day to day operations of procuring investors for new colonial projects or fielding complaints and requests from current

ones. Pretty sure with his math and economics degrees he worked the financial side of things.

And it would seem my intuition was spot on when Kamal joined his wife in gushing over their son's success, "Loves the challenge of getting all the various pieces to fit in a colonial project's puzzle. Finding the right investors and plans for each project. Says it's breathtaking seeing numbers and projections on a haptic display turn into actual colonies."

Tia Alicia nodded, her eyes sparkling, "Colonial work is not exactly glamorous. In fact it's pretty thankless with years or even decades spent trying to get investors, colonists, construction, and the government to all align so that a single colony on the edge of Systems Alliance Space can be created, but it's vital."

"And where his heart is. May this be the start of his path in life." Tio Kamal raised his glass in honor of his son.

I raised my glass self consciously along with my Tia to join the salute, but my mind wandered to the contrast of our situations. He was graduating from a prestigious college and beginning work in a career that he loved. I was about to embark on my own path in the UNSC. He knew what he wanted to do. I was still unsure about the decision I had made.

Tio Kamal placed his glass down and grinned at me, "And how are your sisters doing? We haven't heard from Ari in ages and Lizzy is always so busy."

Happy to have a question I could answer without having to think too hard about, I smiled and nodded, "They're good. Ari is... well, Ari. And Lizzy had just got home before I left."

"She's another one. So full of confidence and potential. I just talked to her earlier today. She was thrilled to be picked for that internship with MI Squared. She was packing her bags so she could be on Arcturus by next week." I was floored by what my Tia said. Lizzy applied and been accepted to intern at MI Squared? When did this happen? Looking down at my omnitool I found it odd that I hadn't received a single notification from her.

Well, when did you bother to ask what your sister was doing?

I frowned at the snarky voice in my head. I guess I had been something of an ass of late. Sure Lizzy and I had our differences, but she was still my sister. I should be proud and supportive of her successes. If I had bothered to find out about them, that is.

"I take it you didn't know about this?" I jerked my head to Tio Kamal who was giving me a knowing look. My guilty expression and silence was all he needed to confirm his suspicions but thankfully the man had enough tact to not reprimand me about it. Instead he smiled and commiserated on the joys of having a sister, "It happens. I still find myself blocking out most of what my sister says whenever we talk."

Tia Alicia giggled, pantomiming shock at her husband's admission, "Are you trying to tell me that you don't find Roshanak's work fascinating?"

He smirked back, replying in an overly faux apologetic tone. "Oh I do. It's just so predictable. Managing pop music acts sounds like those natural science vids where the foolish xeno-sociologist goes to Heshtok to live amongst the Vorchas. They strive to teach the basics of civilization with predictable results."

This time I joined the two of them in their laughter at his quip. Given the exploits in extranet headlines, managing pop music stars did sound like trying to get Vorchas not to act like animals.

"Speaking of family members spending time with the uncivilized, where is our dear daughter? Off with her friends again?" Kamal's laughter died down into a grunt and narrowed eyes directed at his wife, broaching the subject of Linda's absence from this dinner.

I'd noticed her absence when they picked me up earlier but wasn't sure how to bring it up. Especially not knowing if she was avoiding me because of what Ari did to her months ago on Bekenstein. In fact I was pretty amazed my Tia and Tio hadn't brought that up themselves. I would have figured they were still upset over Ari's behavior.

Tia Alicia sighed and shook her head, just as perturbed by their daughter as her husband, "Of course. Heaven forbid she share a meal with her parents and cousin."

Well, there was one bit of eezo lining in the cloud that was today. At least I wasn't as bad as Linda.

My Tio turned his attention back to me with a sigh and smiled in a fatherly way that made me feel uncomfortable and happy at the same time. "You've joined the UNSC at a very special time, Luis. There are no major conflicts in the galaxy and a real possibility of great expansion for humanity and the Council races on the horizon. Cherish these moments of peace. Just work hard, learn all you can, and never take the insults and failures personally." He sighed and became melancholy, staring at his glass of wine and spinning the fluid around, "I enlisted during the height of the Second Insurrection War. My family has had an illustrious tradition in the UNSC going back several generations. I attended the Corbulo Military Academy in anticipation of continuing that legacy. Thought I knew what I was getting into. But the reality of war and violence has a way of destroying those naive preconceptions. The Insurrection had been troubling enough, and then Harvest happened."

My mouth went dry and I hung on his every word as my mind immediately compared his advice with the talk of heroics, bravado and legacy from my enlistment earlier today. That had been like getting caught up in the frenzy of the moment. This moment of clarity sounded more like the aftermath. When you begin to realize what it is you've done and become.

He speared me with a powerful stare and leaned forward, tapping the table with his index finger to emphasize his point. "You've already seen what war and violence can do and survived, so you're ahead of your peers in that regard. But never forget, no matter what you see and are forced to do, that it is moments like this that matter. You fight for those beside you so they can share moments like this with their loved ones. You fight for your moments like this with those you

care about. Because in the end, after all the gray and ambiguity of the galaxy has made it hard to tell if you're the hero or the villain, that's all you can be certain is right and just in your life."

Out of the corner of my eye I noticed Tia Alicia slide her hand across the table and grasp his. He glanced her way to see her warm and tender smile. The tension in his face and shoulders melted away, returning him to the calm and polished man I always thought him to be. But what if that was just his facade? What if the intense Kamal I had just seen was the real Kamal? The same one who stared down a krogan in the middle of a restaurant like it was no big deal. What if that's what the UNSC and war did to you?

What if that's what it did to me?

I glanced again at their joined hands and then to my Tia Alicia. I had always thought that Kamal had to be a very confident and strong man to be married to her for so long. She was intelligent, beautiful, career driven, knew what she wanted, and was not the least bit tolerant of those who didn't. Her job as a diplomat had forged her into a woman to be respected, and even feared. Now I was beginning to think that in their relationship, that strength went both ways. She needed to be just as strong and confident to deal with the man I had a glimpse of.

And his talk of moments of peace with loved ones? Wasn't that what I was running away from? Did that mean I needed to build a new life filled with friends, family and someone special to find solace with? Or patch things up with the family I had?

So many questions added to my concerns from today. All I knew is that I had eight years to figure it out as I walked this path. Problem was I didn't have the first clue where to begin or what to do.

'Apologizing might be a start. Growing up might not hurt either.'

I frowned as the observant and snarky voice in my head stated the painfully obvious yet again.

Thankfully my aunt and uncle respected my silence, or maybe were just caught up in their own.

Tia Alicia paid for the meal with a chirp of her omnitool and we exited the restaurant to board their personal skycar for the short trip back to the hotel on Zakera. When it came time to drop me off I was once again reminded of the awkwardness of farewells with hugs, kisses and handshakes. Or more accurately how I had trivialized the importance of them back on Bekenstein.

With my hands in my pockets and head downcast, I trudged my way from the skycar drop off zone to the hotel lost in my thoughts. Nearing the wide entrance to the hotel lobby I was forced to jump back to avoid colliding into one of those Keepers only to jostle a nearby passing asari. She stumbled to regain her balance and sent a glare my way, muttering something in Thessian that I didn't fully understand. I still had my translation software turned off to avoid having every conversation in the restaurant translated.

She rolled her eyes when she realized I didn't understand a word she said, only to condescendingly enunciate in English with a thick asari accent, "Watch where you're going, furball." She capped it off the the universal asari hand gesture for telling someone to fuck off: raising her palm to spread her fingers and then bring them back together. Something about a lack of scalp fringes or your scalp fringes being fused together being an insult. I never remembered. I'm positive Ari did.

But I definitely understood the furball insult. Humans, Jiralhanae, and Quarrians were the only races with any real hair to speak of, or fur as the other species called it. It was considered unsightly or primitive by the majority of the galaxy.

The Keeper stood by patiently observing our interaction. It's head tracked her movements as she walked away and then it turned back to regard me with that blank stare before carrying on with it's seemingly aimless meandering. Not a care in the world that I had almost bumped into it and activated it's automatic self destruction sequence. Which was a serious infraction on the Citadel and something drilled into your head everywhere you went.

Passing through the lobby I waved to the Corporal to acknowledge him but all he did was look up from his datapad and give me the most contemptuous look he could muster before resuming whatever it was he was doing before. Although I could have sworn he mouthed the words 'fucking newbies.'

Entering the elevator I was joined by a trio of salarians who eyed me and my apparel before talking to each other in their rapid fire language. Which reminded me, my translator was still turned off.

I passed the time by fooling around with my omnitool and activating the translation software. When the doors opened to my floor we were assaulted with the throbbing vibrations of a bassline loud enough to rattle my chest. The salarian trio were taken aback and then as one turned to look at me accusingly. I sheepishly grinned and waved as I exited, wishing them a good evening, but they just stared with a dumbfounded look as the doors closed.

Turning to the left I was greeted with a sight that lead to the sneaking suspicion it was my room that was the offender for playing music this loudly. At the far end of the hallway there were several people congregating near the door to my room with multicolored drinks in hand like this was a dance club.

Weaving my way past people urgently I walked into the open doorway to confirmation that left my blood boiling. My roommate had started a party in the room and several people that were not even part of our enlistment group were lounging about, including on my bed. And one of them was using my personal datapad.

I marched in and snatched the datapad from the guy using it. Taking a glance and I saw he'd been looking at pictures of my family. My sisters to be specific.

Swallowing back the rage boiling away in my mind, I quickly looked around the room and found Auggie sitting on the far edge of his bed, deeply involved in kissing some girl on his lap and a drink in his

hand. Moving in his direction and ready to rip his head off I was distracted by movement coming from the restroom. I froze in my tracks to get a better look when I realized it was a group of people surrounding someone who was snorting something off the counter.

Horrificed I moved closer to confirm my fears that things here could get much worse. It was a bright red crystalline powder sectioned into thin lines.

Red Sand.

I had never actually seen it before, except in vids, but here it was in my room. I hadn't even gone a full day in the UNSC and I was already in deep shit. Spinning on my heel the anger within finally erupted and directed it's ire at my roommate, loud enough to be heard over the obnoxious music. "What. The. Fuck!?"

A few people had already stopped what they were doing to observe me, but my bellowing rage brought the full focus of the room on me. And I didn't care. My eyes were locked on Auggie, who stood clumsily, the girl on his lap nearly tumbling to the floor, and smiled, yelling back at me over the music. "Oh, hey man! You're back! It's cool! These are Galen's friends! They snuck this stuff in for a going away party! Pretty neat, huh?"

No, not pretty neat, asshole. Having the ugly experience of watching my father waste away on alcohol it was apparent Auggie was well on his way to being hammered. I looked over at Galen, a local duct rat who was part of our enlistment group, with contempt but he just glared back.

Taking a deep breathe and thinking this through logically, I came to the conclusion that it wouldn't help for me to start a fight with anyone when what I needed was to get everyone, and the shit they brought, out of our room. Sucking in another deep breath to calm down, I marched over to Auggie and grabbed him forcefully by the shoulders. Leaning in so he could hear me over the music, I pleaded, "Auggie, what hell are you doing? There are people snorting Red Sand in our restroom. If anyone complains about the noise the hotel VI is going to inform that Corporal downstairs. When he comes up here and finds that we are fucked."

His eyes widened slightly and he glanced over his shoulder towards the bathroom as if he was only now realizing how stupid his actions had been. Once again I was forced to reign in urges and impulses to smack him upside his head as it became apparent he never considered the potential consequences of his actions.

His sagging shoulders, downcast eyes and compliant nod was all the permission I needed. Letting go of him, I straightened up and walked over to the vid display to shut off the music, which garnered a round of complaints.

"Alright, party's over. You guys don't have to go home but you have to leave here and take your drugs with you. Thank you and goodnight." I finished my impromptu speech with an sarcastic wave and smile but they all got the hint. They grumbled and took their time, but in less than ten minutes our room was clear of everyone save for me and Auggie, who sat dejected on his bed nursing his drink.

"Sorry. I had asked Galen if he knew how to get some girls and drinks into the hotel and he did one better. He called some people and they brought the good stuff." He slammed back what was left of his purple colored drink and laid back on the bed, hands behind his head as he stared at the beige ceiling of our room. "I just wanted to fuck something and have a good time so I stopped paying attention to what everyone else was doing."

I nodded at his reasoning. It made sense, judging by what little I knew of him. Although one thing stuck out in my mind. The good stuff? Did he mean the Red Sand? My stomach seemed to drop and then do a somersault as I processed what that might have meant. Maybe I misjudged his appearance and behavior being solely alcohol induced. Nervously I asked him, "You didn't do any of the Red Sand, right?"

Auggie didn't bother looking at me when he replied, "It's alright, Luis. They did all the medical tests earlier today, remember?" He then lifted his right hand towards the ceiling and squeezed the fist while scowling in concentration. When his face went red I realized with horror that he was holding his breath while trying to access biotics, which he then let loose and dropped his hand in defeat. "Besides, it didn't even work."

There was no limit to how stupid this kid was. He didn't first fucking clue about what he'd done. "What if they test us again? What if you get eezo sickness?"

My question lingered in the tense air of the room for a moment before Auggie's muttered, "Shit."

"What the fuck were you thinking?" My concern was genuine, both for him and myself, but I cringed as I noticed the shrill Lizzyesque tone of my question.

He sat up and began rubbing his face, nervously speaking as the consequences of his actions tonight began sinking in. "Shit. Shit. I remember you telling me you were a biotic and I wanted to see what that was like. I asked one of the guys that showed up if he knew how to score some Red Sand. I gave him all the credits I had and he came back with some." He looked up pathetically, beseeching me for help. "You're a biotic. What am I supposed to do?"

What the fuck does my being a biotic have to do with Red Sand? I wracked my brain for answers but this was beyond my depth. The Systems Alliance, and the galaxy in general, was fairly lax on the usage of substances for recreation, but everyone drew the line on Red Sand. The only answer that kept popping up was Galen. Him and his friends got Auggie, and me by association, into this mess. He needed to fix this. "Which room is Galen in?"

Auggie looked at me perplexed before shrugging and going back to his inebriated worrying. Right. So he wasn't going to be much help. I went to the door and opened it to see if anyone was still lingering in the hallway, but as luck would have it they had taken my advice literally. Everyone was gone, probably in their individual rooms or left the hotel by now.

Chewing on my lip I contemplated my options. I could ask the hotel

hospitality VI for assistance in locating his room but I didn't remember his full name. There couldn't be that many people named Galen registered to stay tonight in the hotel, right? Still it was better than going down the hall and buzzing the door chime on every door like a jackass.

Heading towards the terminal in the room I paused as I noticed Auggie was missing. Where could he have gone? He couldn't have gone out a window. We were up far enough that it was nothing but vacuum outside. I had been at the door the whole time, so unless he was some manner of ninja, he didn't sneak past me. My puzzled musings were interrupted by the sound of retching and moaning coming from the restroom.

Oh fucking hell. He's not just drunk and high, but he's a lightweight too.

Or does eezo sickness kick in that quickly?

Frustrated and fed up with how this day had been, I stomped my way to the hotel terminal. Activating it with a wave of my hand I barked at the VI. "VI, find Galen I don't know his last name. He's on this floor."

"_Processing. Galen Kemp. Room 2047. Would you like to initiate a vid chat?"_

"Yes, I would like to initiate a vid chat with Galen Kemp in room 2047. Thank you for being soooooo helpful." My reply was caustic but that was the beauty of VI's. They were too stupid to pick up on tone and emotion unless they had been programmed to do so. Otherwise it would have been alerting the hotel staff that I sounded murderous while my roommate's puking echoed from the restroom.

A blue screen with the hotel's company logo loaded while the call was made. My patience was wearing thin with each successive bout of gagging and heaving coming from the restroom. Finally my luck seemed to be looking up when Galen's glowering face appeared on the display. "What the fuck do you want, Luis?"

"I want you to get my roommate something to make him stop throwing up the shit you gave him." Punctuating my request was a perfectly timed vomiting. Galen's blue eyes widened and his face lost it's peevishness while I continued on in my acerbic manner, "You could try getting him something to purge it from his system while you're at it so he can pass any scans."

Galen's eyes narrowed again at my second request and he folded his arms in defiance. "It's not my problem. Why should I do anything if Auggie can't handle his shit?"

"Because if you don't then I am going to be forced to find help that can. And if we get caught, now or later, then I am going to tell them where he got the stuff and who brought it in."

He snarled and fidgeted in place, frustrated at what he saw as having been dragged into this mess, although that was a matter of perspective. From my point of view he was the source and I was the unwilling participant in this. "Fuck. Fine. I'll be right over."

I nodded and ended the call. Walking towards the bathroom door I saw that Auggie had passed out hugging the toilet with his head on the rim. The VI had also failed to flush his latest offering to the porcelain god. I nudged him with my shoe to wake him but he didn't budge, only moaned. Well at least he was still alive. That's good. I think.

The door chime activated letting me know someone was there and I hoped it was Galen but with the way my luck was going today it might as well be the Corporal or C-Sec.

I swiped my hands across the back of the door to activate the haptic display and was relieved to see Galen. When I opened the door he brushed past me and into the restroom, letting out a sigh and mumbled "Fuck."

I walked up beside him, taking the moment to bask in the unbelievable circumstances over the past few days that had lead to me to this point, and asked him plainly, "So what do we do?"

Galen brought up his left wrist and activated his omnitool without answering me. He quickly typed out a message to someone and then sent it. Turning off his omnitool he looked at me and frowned, "I just asked someone I know to get him something to calm his stomach and then two doses of detox. I need you to get me lots of ice."

Bewildered at his request I turned to him with eyebrows raised and confusion apparent on my face, "What the hell do you need ice for?"

He kneeled down and began undoing Auggie's shoes, heaving a long suffering sigh, "Detox raises your body temp. Two doses will be extra strong and in his condition he's not going to be able to cool himself off so we need to do it for him. Unless you want to be the one to undress him and put him in the tub?"

Well, when he puts it like that.

After several boring trips to the ice machine at the opposite end of the hallway, punctuated by returning to find Auggie in further states of undress, I had managed to retrieve enough to fill the tub to a level Galen found acceptable. Although how he knew was beyond me. He didn't strike me as the type to be a medical professional. The whole situation was insane but at this point I didn't care. If this kept all of us out of trouble then so be it.

And in keeping in line with the unsettling chain of events for today, to kill time waiting for his friend to show up we watched an episode of Captain Cosmic on the vid display in the room.

"You know she's not going to be Captain Cosmic anymore, right?" I frowned at Galen's non sequitur while Captain Cosmic defeated Ghim the evil Batarian pirate by spacing him out of his own ship. Then frowned even deeper at the thought of the current actress playing Captain Cosmic no longer wearing the famous gold and crimson battle armor. She was practically synonymous with everything Captain Cosmic. The only one better than her had been the original, like eighty years ago.

I turned to him, curious what he knew. "So why is she leaving? And who is going to replace her?"

Sitting on the floor and leaning against the foot of Auggie's bed, Galen shrugged, "They want her gone. Most actresses who play Captain Cosmic only last a few years. Maybe a decade. She's been doing it since we were fighting on Harvest. Time for someone young and new." He frowned in contemplation, rubbing his chin slightly and trying to remember a detail. "I think I heard it was the lead singer of the Dramaxeens that is going to replace her."

My jaw dropped. They were replacing her with Celestyn Law? "Are you fucking kidding me? She can't even act!"

He raised an eyebrow and looked at me crossly, "It's Captain Cosmic. She doesn't need to know how to act. She just has to fill out the armor. And she's definitely going to fill out that chestplate."

My frown turned into a surly scowl as I petulantly folded my arms. This day just gets better and better. Now my favorite actress was getting canned as Captain Cosmic. Everything about today was change and uncertainty. I grew up watching her as a kid. It had been my favorite show. Mindless? Yes. Stupid? You bet. Over the top? Absolutely. Entertaining? Definitely.

And the current actress who played Captain Cosmic, Ondrea Mostafavi, was still as athletic and gorgeous as the day she started. There was no way they could get someone better. She was born to do this.

But on the positive side of things, all of this indignation was enough to take my mind off the fact my unconscious roommate was naked in a tub of ice and I was engaging in a debate about Captain Cosmic with the asshole who helped him wind up that way.

Within an hour his 'friend', an older and gruff looking human who snarled at the sight of Galen, had shown up and handed off a small package before promptly leaving. From their interaction I kind of got the idea they were not happy with each other making me wonder what sort of favors or strings Galen pulled to get this. Or if any of this would work.

I followed him into the restroom while he unwrapped the package and produced three auto-injectors. Two were a sort of grayish blue color while a third was pinkish orange. Livid and salmon, I think.

I grimaced as I realized I even knew livid and salmon were colors. Thanks, Lizzy and Abuela.

Galen wasted no time and lifted Auggie's nearest arm out of the tub and took the salmon... the pinkish orange colored injector and applied it. A soft beep verified a successful injection and he tossed it aside. He repeated this with the other two and then stood, sighing in exhaustion as he stared down at Auggie's unconscious body in the tub.

Had to agree with him on that. It was almost midnight here on the Citadel, with it's twenty galactic standard hour day. Looking on at the scene in the restroom of my hotel room I had to shake my head at it all.

This had to be a record for the worst first day as a Marine.

Galen broke out of his stupor first as he turned around to gather the used auto-injectors and their wrapping. Now that everything was over my curiosity began resurfacing and I wanted to know just how he was so knowledgeable about this stuff. And how he and his friends could get stuff like this so quickly. "So does your friend work at a nearby clinic? I mean, we can trust this stuff, right?"

He looked up and frowned, staring at me for a beat before answering gruffly, "He runs errands for a chop shop in Tayseri. The stuff is legit."

Now it was my turn to frown. What in the hell is a chop shop? I'd never heard that term before. It must have been some local duct rat slang from the Wards. At my confused look Galen looked at me disbelievingly, "A chop shop? You know... a Wards doc?" When my confusion didn't clear he shook his head and brushed past me, spent and exasperated, "Most clinics on the Wards are not exactly legal. C-Sec and the CMH ask too many questions. So people go to chop shops specifically because they don't ask those questions."

Ah, now that made sense. Following his logic it was easy to see how he managed to procure several drugs that if I remember from my mother's work back on Mindoir required a doctor's approval and prescription. "Like sell meds to someone with no questions asked?"

"If you have the credits, they can get you what you want. Pretty much the unwritten rule of the galaxy." He walked to the door and turned back to give me some final instructions before leaving, "He'll be fine and wake up in a few hours. Just make sure he eats something and drinks plenty of water unless he wants a massive headache all day tomorrow."

Once the door closed I turned back and examined Auggie, trying to gauge the level of progress the meds were having but the only conclusive thing I could confirm was that he was unconscious and his breath was going to be atrocious. I smacked my own lips together as I contemplated how bad my own breath might be and figured it was time to brush my teeth anyways. The best way to put this day behind me was to call it a night and just go to sleep.

Midway through brushing my teeth, the door chime activated with it's annoyingly loud chirping and I paused, fearful of who might be at the door now. Quickly spitting out the mixture and rinsing my mouth I jogged to the door and swiped my hands to activate the haptic display but standing outside was the last person I expected. It was Ilyse.

I opened the door, dumbstruck at the sight of her. She was freshly showered with slightly damp hair and wearing a matching set of gray pants and long sleeved top that fit her figure perfectly. It almost looked like she was getting ready to go out for the night, or maybe that was how she normally dressed. Her grin faltered when she spoke, trailing off at the end and sounding uncertain. "Oh. Uh, hey. I was just about to go downstairs and get something to eat and wondered if you wanted to go with me?"

My mind locked up. An absolutely gorgeous woman got dressed up to have dinner. With me. And I already ate. Plus there was the whole

part about my roommate was having some sort of overdose.

I was fully convinced now. Today was the worst and the universe and whatever deities ruled it hated me.

Without my mind functioning my mouth began it's nervous stammering as I tried to avoid embarrassing myself, "I already did. Eat. I already eated." At about the same time her eyebrows rose slightly I realized what I had just said. Stupid comment in front of the pretty girl? Check. Chuckling nervously, my hand went reflexively to the back of my neck where I fingered my bio-amp port just above my collar. "Ate. I ate earlier."

She stood there, amused and shocked at my ramblings. Her gray eyes sparkled with mirth while examining me as she suppressed a smirk. "Oh-kay,"

My heart was pounding in my chest as I contemplated over and over what to do. I had a beautiful woman asking me out to dinner but I had a roommate who was unconscious in a tub of ice. There was nothing guaranteed about accompanying Ilyse but I could guarantee nothing would happen if I stayed here and watched Captain Cosmic until I passed out. It wasn't my fault or responsibility for Auggie's choices, right? I glanced back at the door to the restroom.

In the end poor Auggie never stood a chance against my teenage hormones. "But I can join you."

"Are you sure?" She looked relieved that I accepted but her eyebrows knit ever so slightly. I suppose wanting to go sit down and watch someone you barely knew eat might be weird but nothing compared to how weird everything was going today. This was relatively tame.

I nodded and stepped out into the hallways, still fully dressed from earlier. Closing the door behind me I made small talk to avoid awkward silences. "Yeah. I was just watching Captain Cosmic."

She cocked her head to the side and smiled wider, an auburn eyebrow raising at my explanation. "Oh well that sounds like an exciting way to spend your last night as a free man."

I chuckled when a stray bit of guilt passed through my thoughts. It may have been a lame way to spend my night but it was still loads better than the night Auggie was having. Shouldn't he have been in bed with a prostitute by now? Looking up at Ilyse, I shrugged and retorted, "Still way better than my roommate's idea."

Her eyes crossed and lips pouted as she thought back to who my roommate was. A quick look of realization followed by a grimace was all the confirmation I needed on what she thought of Auggie, but she decided to voice her opinion anyways. "The guy who kept talking about showering with hot girls? That's your roommate?" She looked over my shoulder at the closed door like she could see through it, a look of revulsion on her face. "Do I even want to know what he's doing? I passed by and saw the party he had going on earlier."

My eyes widened as panic set in. Did she see what was happening inside? "He's... you know what? Nevermind."

Nodding at my dismissal she sighed and cleared her face with a bright

smile and suggested, "Well we can hang out in my room if you want?"

Weren't we supposed to head down to the restaurant in the hotel? I know it was late but the Citadel was one of those places that never seemed to sleep what with people of different races arriving and leaving at all hours of the day. "I thought you were going to get something to eat?"

Her grin widened as she turned and beckoned me to follow down the hall. My eyes slipped into the natural pattern we had created by trailing down her back and to the rounded shape of her backside before jerking my eyes up at the sound of her voice, "I'll order some room service and then we can be lame together watching Captain Cosmic."

Oh. Turns out today was not done with the weirdness. Me, her and her roommate eating room service and staying up all night watching vids? This sounded less like she wanted to spend time together alone and more like one of the slumber parties that Ari and her dweeb girlfriends had all the time. And I somehow doubt this would turn into the type of slumber party that dominated male fantasies. Still, it was better than doing the same thing alone in my room. "Your roommate won't mind?"

Ilyse stopped in front of a door further down the hall and keyed her omnitool to unlock it. The door opened and she gestured for me to enter the darkened room, smirking like she knew something I didn't. "Nope. She's a local. Her and her girlfriend got a room on a different floor and they're spending the night there."

I entered and thanked the dark for hiding my blush and nervous grin. So now instead of a late night dinner or slumber party we were alone in her room for the rest of the night? A thrill surged through me that this meant what I thought it meant, but what little common sense I had urged me to be practical. She might just want to hang out. Still, my curiosity prompted me to find out in a roundabout way, using her roommate's situation as an example. "Oh. Well, that's neat. You get a room all to yourself and she gets laid one last time before we ship out tomorrow morning."

"VI, lights." Ilyse closed the door and stood nervously by the door. She seemed to be as unsure as I was, smiling like a fool but doing things get rid of the pent up tension in her body like constantly tucking a strand of hair behind her ear for the third time since she'd buzzed my door. An awkward silence grew as she was either ignoring my thinly veiled question or trying to answer it as clumsily as I had asked it. Her nerves got to the best of her as she replied, "Yeah, at least I don't have to worry about her walking around naked anymore."

Okay. Wasn't expecting that response but from the sound of it she didn't exactly expect her roommate to be a nudist. However, it did sound like an amusing story. I smiled widely and asked incredulously, "That happened?"

Her eyes widened comically as she nodded her head in mock terror but the smile on her face gave it all away, causing us both to chuckle. She moved past me to sit on the bed farthest from the door, giving me another glimpse of her from behind. If the small peeks I had

accidentally taken during the exam were anything to go by, she was quite the specimen from any angle. Continuing the story on her introduction to her roommate, she gestured around the room to show locations and placements. "Oh yeah. I arrived early this morning and when I walked in she was just strutting around without anything on. I stood there for a moment wondering if she noticed me come in but then she just looks at me and goes 'You gonna stare the whole time?'"

"Guess she got an early start on our exam?" We both laughed at her tale and I took a moment to regard how the magnetism of her beauty was amplified by her carefree smile.

She broke through my musings with her resigned sigh as she leaned back on the bed, her weight resting on her elbows. Looking up at me slyly, she commiserated on the grim reality that faced us as members of the UNSC now. "Well we better get used to that sort of thing. Looks like it's going to be a regular occurrence. I can just imagine how bad it's going to be once I'm on a ship for months at a time."

My eyes lit up with mirth as I contemplated what she meant only to realize she was joining the Navy. Ha! She might be stationed with Auggie. Poor girl. "Yeah, that's going to take some time to get used to. Still, you and my roommate will be able to console each other."

She sat up and lost all charm, glaring at me with mouth hanging open as she processed what I had said. When it became clear her eyes widened and she let out a pitiful moan, "No. Please tell me he's not joining the Navy?" At my nod she dramatically threw herself backwards and let out a frustrated sigh. Once she had calmed down she continued staring at the ceiling and addressed the matter morosely, "Great. Awesome. As if it isn't going to be awkward enough, now I have to look forward to potentially being assigned to the same ship as him. Like today couldn't get worse."

I was chuckling at her antics but my heart soared as she voiced my exact sentiments about the absurdity of today. "Right? And what was up with all those weird exercises?"

Ilyse snorted and then giggled. She sat up again and her gray eyes locked with my brown ones for a moment. And just like before we looked away bashfully. After a moment she sighed, restarting our conversation as if nothing had happened. "I swore I was going to fall flat on my bare ass today. Any second one of those exercises was going to make me trip and then whoops. Legs in the air and everyone would be able to get an even better view."

I nodded along, even more amazed at how in sync our minds were. The same paranoid thoughts had gone through my head as well. "Yeah, I kept thinking that too. All I needed was for that freezing floor to touch more of my body."

"That would have been more embarrassing than it already was." She wryly added while starting to give me an odd piercing look while biting her lip. Like she was contemplating something about me and thinking really hard. Whatever it was it made me even more self conscious.

I looked around the room as another awkward pause filled the lull in our talk. Periodically I would glance back at her and she would catch my eyes, staring at me and grinning. Each time she seemed bolder and more sure of herself which was a direct contrast to how I felt. It was getting to the point I was about to begin swatting at my face to see if there was something on it that I hadn't noticed. After nearly a minute I decided to nervously continue talking since she seemed to be happy to play this game of silent grinning. "I'm still not sure that wasn't a prank they pulled on us. Some military hazing or something."

"Hmmm. Maybe. But at least one good thing came out of it." Her voice sounded... deeper? It was seductive and sent a shiver down my spine but I still wasn't sure if my imagination was making me misinterpret her intentions. She could just be playful or maybe I did have something on my face and she was trying not to laugh. The chances that she actually was coming on to me were... well, my luck couldn't change after everything that happened today, right?

Feeling an uncomfortable mixture of anxiety, anticipation, fear and desire made my mouth work even faster to make me sound like an even bigger idiot than usual as I lamely guessed what she was hinting towards. "We're in the UNSC now?"

Ilyse got up off the bed and sat down next to me, chuckling slightly and taking my hand. Up close I could see how beautiful the color of her eyes were, gray flecked with shades of light blue. My eyes were instinctively drawn to the movement of her soft and full pink lips as she pursed them a bit. Her hand lifted slowly to hold the side of my head, her eyes never leaving mine as my heart skipped a beat. She leaned in and lightly kissed me but before I could react she had pulled away, a self satisfied grin on those delicious lips as she leaned her forehead against mine. "You're cute. I mean that I got to get a pretty good look at you and I liked what I saw."

Her words, kiss and physical contact shut my mind down. Just complete mental failure. I was frozen. I suppose a part of me was celebrating like a maniac while the rest was screaming for me to reengage and take advantage of this situation before we lost it. The best I could do was slow nod and an overwhelmed. "Oh."

She laughed and cradled my face with both hands, kissing me again, this time deeper and stronger. I'd never really kissed anyone like this before but instinct drove me forward, matching her movements and pressure. Then her lips parted and the soft and wet fullness of her tongue slithered against my lips begging for entrance. When I acquiesced, joining her tongue with mine I was lost to something akin to a VI autopilot mode. I wasn't in control anymore and just here for the ride.

Our hands slowly began roaming with caresses and grabbing. At her pushing on my shoulders I leaned back, laying down on the bed as she climbed on top of me, our lips and tongues never separating. When her dark red hair fell forward it tickled at my ears, cheeks and neck but I blocked it out in favor of drinking the sensations of kissing and the way my body tensed and shivered as her hands slid over my shoulders and torso. I committed to memory how her supple and curvaceous body responded to my clumsy attempts to explore her.

When it became too much and oxygen was a concern we broke the kiss

and she sat up, grinding her hips into mine slowly as she steadied herself by placing her hands on my torso, pinning me to the mattress. Her face was red and flushed, but this time she wore a beautiful and cocky smile. "When I caught you checking me out I kinda knew you felt the same way."

Remembering the view I had seen earlier my eyes wandered down from her flushed face to her freckled neck and finally resting on the swell of her breasts beneath her gray top. Just thinking about it caused my hips to involuntarily greet her grinding with my own. The combined sensation of the warmth emanating from her core and her weight bearing down my against my crotch through the layers of our clothing was drawing me into a fevered delirium. Feeling a bit guilty at being so pervy earlier I smiled up at her sheepishly and apologized through my increasingly hazy lust. "Yeah, sorry about that."

Smiling back at me, she took my hands and guided them under the tight fabric of her top, lifting it to show her pale and toned abdomen. Our joined hands crept upwards across the smooth and tender flesh of her torso until they slid under the confines of her bra and found their targets. She used her hands to guide me, showing how she liked her breasts kneaded, softly and with a steady rhythm, as the tension of her bra and top bound our hands firmly against her chest. Her index fingers alternated with gently circling and flicking her nipples and I moved my own to experimentally give it a shot. She nodded and smiled encouragingly before closing her eyes and sucking in a hissing breath, her slow and steady grinding atop me becoming more pronounced. She removed her hands and resumed her grip on my torso in order to brace herself as I continued my exploration of the warm and heavy flesh in my hands.

When it was apparent that would not be enough she pulled back to get me to sit up. She immediately began kissing me wantonly, slowly and forcefully entwining her tongue with my mine. Our mouths and tongues danced until we need to part for breath again, and she used the opportunity to kiss my jawline and down my neck, eliciting a squirm and groan from me before I even knew what was happening. My head tilted and reared back, exposing more of my neck for her kisses and light bites. Her ministrations continued as she jerked on my shirt pulling it up and, with my assistance, over my head, where it landed somewhere in the distance. She repeated the same actions with her own top, accidentally elbowing me in the face causing us both to pause and giggle slightly. When the laughter died down our eyes met and she tortured me by taking her time in undoing the center clasp of her black bra but once loosened she shrugged it off her shoulders and down her arms.

I took a moment to take in her topless form. She had been beautiful, even in the cold, professional setting of the exam, but now she was practically a goddess in the dim lighting of her hotel room. Her pale peach colored skin was flushed red, making the pink tips of her breasts stand out that much more. I had a hard time deciding where I wanted to touch and kiss more but she took the reins, again, and pushed my head towards her chest.

Once again a slave to instinct and lust, I was drawn to give the rosy nub of her left breast an experimental lick. When her head lolled back and she exhaled a throaty moan I was encouraged to continue. Encircling the nipple with my lips, I sucked lightly, keenly aware of

the heat and texture in my mouth and then her movements and sounds. My teeth clamped down around the delicate flesh slightly as I hissed, the pressing and gyrating of her hips into mine stroking the already aching bulge there. Her response was to grasp me tightly around the back of my head and press my face deeper into her bosom as her breath caught in her throat and she narrowed her eyes in delight. Sensing I was onto something my mind was oddly able to focus through the pleasure and distractions. I began experimenting, adding in my hands to give dual attention to her breasts. It was a new exciting game to see what got the best reactions from her. How much I could get her back to arch, her head to throw back, her lips to part as she hissed in a breath, her fingers to run through my hair and her hips to grind into me with wild abandon. The intoxication and intimacy of it all was creating a positive feedback making me feel more and more eager to have her squirm in pleasure.

Soon enough that eagerness compelled my hands to wander beyond her breasts, notably to her hips where they held her tight. With every undulating motion of her hips my hands pushed her down firmly, enhancing her drive to rub out our mutual desire through our clothing. My grip slipped lower and lower until the tips of my fingers were dipping below her waistband and beginning to massage the top of her ass. She smirked at my bold advance and moved away, dismounting me to stand beside the bed. Lacking the finesse and showmanship of taking off her bra, she undid her belt and loosened her pants before tugging them and her panties off in one quick movement. Stepping out of them and kicking off her shoes, she climbed back on the bed but instead of straddling me she hovered near my feet.

Once she began undoing my own shoes I overcame my stupefied staring at the sight of her fully naked form. I quickly undid my own belt and lifted my lower half as she helped pull the last stitches of clothing I had on with one movement much as she had before.

She stared hungrily at my crotch, absorbed in the unveiling of my throbbing erection. Starting to feel self conscious I reached for her to pull her into a kiss but she pulled away and grabbed at my shaft, give it an experimental squeeze and light jerk. I fell back on the bed, fighting for breath as pleasure unlike anything I had ever felt before rocked my body. This was nothing like doing it myself. Just as I had played with finding the right way to lavish attention upon her breasts, she too took up the challenge of seeing how many ways she could get me to moan and squirm with her hands on my erection. By the time she worked her mouth and tongue into the equation I had resorted to reciting the star systems of the Systems Alliance in my head just to hold onto the throbbing pulse building at the base of my shaft.

Somewhere around the stars of the Orun Expanse she gave up all pretense of experimenting and I got my first ever blowjob. As her head bobbed up and down, her hair tickling my thighs and abs, I tried vainly to block out the surge of pleasure and sounds of the her moans and slurping. The hot and wet feel of her mouth was incredible and every time she swirled her tongue I had to bite my lip and squeeze the sheets beneath us to hold on for just a little longer. Eventually it was a lost cause and I reached down to rapidly tap her shoulder, too afraid to say anything because I'm sure in my given state it would sound horribly wrong with an high pitched squeal associated with it.

She drew back one long and noisy stroke and removed herself, just in time as my world erupted, sending a violent shudder throughout my body as the throbs of pleasure timed with each pulse, coating my abs, her hands and the bed. As the throbs died down a haze set in over my brain, lulling me to sleep until I felt Ilyse's hand tug on my cock, instantly bringing me to full alertness. I sat up on my elbows and took deep, steady breaths as my eyes bored into hers. She brought her right hand, covered in my essence, up to her face and took a tentative lick. Her face scrunched up in disgust and she quickly wiped the offensive substance off on the bedsheets besides her before joking with a heart warming smile, "Might want to change your diet, Marine."

I nodded and wiped the fluid off my lower torso and then wiped my hand off on the bed. I'd heard things about that but it had never been something I had reason to put much thought towards. Now I know better. Still, I was keenly aware of the fact she had brought me to orgasm. Glancing down towards her nether regions I got the urge to play the game again and reciprocate what she had just done for me.

I took the lead this time, grabbing her by her hips and jerking forward while stretching out onto my stomach. She instinctively fell on her back and when my head lowered she smiled and spread her legs to accommodate me. Granted, anything I knew about what to do here came from instincts, basic biology, sexual education classes and a heavy consumption of porn. That probably ruled me out from being a skilled lover but since this was my first time and I just wanted her to enjoy this I'd be happy with being competent. The first thing I noticed was a heavily musky smell. Nothing bad. Arousing, actually. Distinctly feminine and driving parts of my mind to act on autopilot again. My mouth watered as I lowered to take a lick along the length of her folds.

Resisting the urge to smack my lips like I was at a dinner table, I was pleasantly surprised at how much I enjoyed the taste. It wasn't good in the same way I thought of food or drink, but it had an agreeable flavor that something in the back of my mind linked with sex and pleasure on a primal level. It encouraged me to take more licks and then slurping kisses and sucking nibbles. Again, I tried all variations I could, lavishing attention on her while lapping up at her juices. Combining the efforts of my fingers and mouth brought the best results. Her hips rolled in a slow motion as she grabbing my head, shoving my face deeper into her core and rubbing my nose against the light patch of her soft dark hair. Within minutes I had found some magic rhythm that had her alternating between soft panting wails and low guttural moans as she rotated and thrust her hips over and over. Finally, as my jaw started to ache, she tensed and grabbed my hair and ears painfully to hold me in place as she nearly smothered me with her pelvis.

After her shudders had subsided her body lost it's tension and she limply fell back in place on the bed, shoving my face and fingers away from her overstimulated core. Covering her eyes with her right forearm she drew in deep breaths while I sat up and wondered what to do next. Instinctive impulses had me idly stroking the length of my swollen member as I drank in the visage of her beauty. The skin along her shoulders, chest and face was nearly as red as her hair now. Her large breasts were flattened against her chest but still stood prominently as they heaved slowly with her every greedy breath. The

muscles in her slim waist and toned abdomen flexed and tensed with residual shudders. And the gentle swell of her rounded hips flared out into slim legs bent and splayed to either side of me.

My every inclination and intuition compelled me to kiss her. Show her how much I appreciated this. So I crawled forward until I hovered over her and softly kissed her lips, her chin, her nose. She slid her arm away from her eyes and squinted up at me with a lazy grin. I continued my affectionate assault by kissing her temples and below her ears. I had no clue what I was doing but I hoped she enjoyed it and understood what I was trying to convey. She began to squirm and hum as my kisses trailed along her neck and jawline just as she had done to me before. When I leaned forward to devour her neck the tip of my shaft accidentally made contact with the entrance of her folds. We both froze and locked eyes, searching for permission from each other. She nodded and whispered, "It's alright. My implant is active."

I slowly rolled my hips forward, trying to line myself up with her entrance but lacking in experience all I managed to do was tease the both of us. Giggling and taking pity on me she reach between us and grabbed my shaft. Lining us up she thrust slightly. We both gasped in unison as I lowered my head to her left shoulder and squeezed my eyes shut. I focused on keeping my breathing even as I slowly pulled back and then sliding my hips forward. Ilyse moaned as she kissed on my neck and ran her hands along my lower back and ass, encouraging me with each slow thrust to bury myself deeper between her legs.

The sensation was incredible. Indescribable. Now I fully understood why people lost their minds over sex. Her soft and velvety depths stretched and squeezed, gripping me like a liquid vice. It fully awakened the primal urge that had been guiding me so far. It took everything I had not to give into the animal like impulse to begin thrusting wildly and claim her. Instead I closed my eyes and began running through some of the focusing exercises Matron Megalos had taught me for controlling my nervous system. Deep breaths and keen awareness of what my body was telling me while also engaging in the physical world with whatever activity my body was currently performing. Like finding the perfect rhythm of rocking and scooping my hips into Ilyse as she matched my every thrust with the raising and grinding of her own.

Soon I had managed to feel the pleasure without letting it control me, enjoying the sensation of making love to this incredible woman. Ilyse continued to kiss my neck between her harsh and uneven breaths. She latched on to my shoulders, squeezing me tightly as her legs had came up and wrapped around my thighs in an effort to help propel me deeper inside of her. I lifted my head from her shoulder and began peppering it with light kisses, causing her to close her eyes and turn her head slightly to expose more of her neck and collar to my kisses which I gladly accepted.

A familiar sensation began building alongside the pleasure. A tingling not unlike pins and needles but put together with the thrill of sex it felt amazing. Almost numbing. Ilyse must have felt it too because she tensed before letting out almost agonized moan in my ear, her panting now more pronounced with my every thrust. Within seconds her pulsating core became even more slick and welcoming, the joining of our bodies now producing a squelching noise that added to the sounds of our labored and shallow breathing in the room.

Then Ilyse shocked me by biting my ear strongly, before playfully breathing a whisper broken up by her own pants, "Fuck. That. Feels. Good. Keep. Going."

Not that I had any idea about stopping but if the lady approves then I'll double my efforts. As I peppered her neck with kisses my hips kept a steady rhythm and force. Now the tingling sensation was intensifying and Ilyse groaned harder, clawing at my shoulders and digging her heels painfully into the back of my thighs. It didn't matter, this was worth it. Sex was awesome. Nothing could compare.

So much so that I disregarded the slightly lightheaded feeling I was getting and the sensation of strong tingling my body currently felt. Now that I think about it, it was almost like when I used my...

Oh no. No. No no no no no no no.

Before I could even fully comprehend what I had done Ilyse unleashed a keening wail in my ear, her eyes squeezed shut "Fuck! Don't Stop! I don't know what you're doing but don't stop! Everything feels fuzzy and light!"

I complied and kept going, hoping nothing went wrong but I was positive I had activated my biotics somehow. Opening my eyes I was greeted the vivid indigo and blue aura of my biotics encasing us both.

Fuck! The mental exercises! Damn it! My heart almost seized as I recalled the Matron's blunt advice about not using biotics when intimate with someone until I was more skilled and in control of my gift.

Still, if Ilyse liked it then maybe everything had to be fine, right?

Too afraid to find out if I could release my aura safely while in the middle of sex I shut my eyes and hoped nothing went wrong. Instead I responded to the fast and frantic movements of her hips with pounding thrusts of my own. Within seconds Ilyse clamped down on me, from all angles. Her lungs sucked in one powerful breath before unleashing a ragged primal scream until she was spent.

Pausing in my thrusts, I observed her to see if there was anything wrong, but Ilyse looked blissful and content, her eyes closed peacefully as she breathed deeply to calm herself. We stayed like that for a few seconds, until she opened her eyes to smile at me. Once she quickly realized we were encased in the dark blue corona of my biotics her look of bliss and passion melted away as she recoiled and scrambled out of our embrace. I released the effect of my biotics gently and stared at her, unsure of what to do or say. This was my fault, I shouldn't have just done that without warning her.

"You're a freak?!" She had huddled near the head of the bed, pulling at the bedsheets to cover herself and looked at me accusingly.

A freak? Oh man. Please don't let her be one of those people that thinks biotics are mutants and monsters. This had to be her fright over having it happen during sex without warning.

Shrugging and rubbing the port at the back of my neck I'm sure I made for a pitiful sight. Naked, sweaty, throbbing erection and fearful repentance all over my face. "Sorry. It was an accident."

"You're a biotic. A fucking mutant." The contempt in her voice left no doubt what she thought. Well, there went the hope she was just scared and shocked. She stood up and quickly walked past me to the other side of the room to put as much distance between us as she could while staring at me like I was a wild animal that would pounce on her at any second. She was agitated and worried about the situation and began to talk out loud. "Oh god. I kissed you. I sucked you off and let you fuck me. Oh gross, I had you inside of me."

It's pretty hard to hear someone talk about you like you're some sort of subhuman creature. Especially when that person is someone you just a moment ago were naked and intimate with. I waited for her to calm down enough that I could explain how sorry I was for not telling her, but, well, it had been good, right? Maybe her ideas about biotics were wrong if she had been attracted to and enjoyed having sex with one? I mean, the orgasm she just had was aided by my being a biotic and she definitely enjoyed that. She had to see common sense, right?

"Please leave. Just... go. Get out."

Or not. In the ensuing silence I searched for my clothes that had been thrown about the room while she sat on her bed wrapped in a bedsheet and glared at me. Once dressed I tried to apologize but she pointed at the door and would have none of it. It was placing an aching pain in my heart and mind to see how those beautiful features that I had been so enamored with before turned into something vile and twisted. The bright red flush of her face, which I had associated with her bashfulness and lust, was now tainted by anger. Anger directed at me simply because of what I am. It's not like I asked to be a biotic.

I exited her room into hallway and tried to take my mind off the shock of what just happened. Looking down at my omnitool's chronometer I saw it was nearly 0130 Citadel time. I had to be downstairs and ready to go in about four galactic hours. Chuckling humorlessly and rubbing my face in depressed frustration at the way my night had turned out. I should have known better than to expect anything to go right today. I trudged down the hall and was thankful that there was no one to see how pitiful I must look on the walk of shame back to my room.

Keying in the code from my omnitool, my door unlocked to the blare of the vid display showing some old war movie from the 23rd century and the gag worthy smell of greasy food assaulting my senses. Auggie had evidently awoken and was sitting on his bed devouring several plates of food. He turned my direction and lazily waved, still looking sluggish but at least not throwing up everywhere.

He was also naked and didn't seem the slightest bit perturbed about it. I stared before blowing out an exasperated and defeated breath, realizing that nothing about tonight should shock me anymore.

"Hey, man. Where've you been?" Auggie slurred around a mouthful of food.

I looked skyward as I contemplated an answer for that. I was just having an incredible end to the day that would have made up for everything on this entire trip by having sex with a beautiful woman and it was ruined by my being a biotic and her being a bigot.

Nah, that was too honest. He'll only ask for more details. Stick to vague answers, Luis. "Out."

Auggie nodded and turned back to watching the vid, which I now noticed was a historical recreation of the Argyre Planitia Invasion during the Interplanetary War. If I remember correctly, this was when the precursors to the UNSC special forces were first used. He pointed towards a plate that was especially odorous and offered me some of his food. "You hungry? I ordered some extra onion rings."

My stomach lurched from the smell of the deep fried onions and I wondered if my night might also involve my own bout of retching. I shook my head and nodded in his direction. "Nah, I'm good. You gonna get dressed?"

Auggie looked down at himself, almost as if I didn't realize he was naked, before looking back and shaking his head and shoving another onion ring into his mouth. "It's so hot in here. You're not hot? I'm burning up, man."

Nope. I have a huge throbbing erection and a queasy stomach, though. Again, too much honesty and details. Keep it vague, Luis. "Nope. I'm gonna go take a shower" A very long and cold shower.

I grabbed my bag to take with me into the restroom but Auggie called out helpfully, "There was all this ice in the tub. I don't know how it got there."

Bless his oblivious heart. "I bet."

Once alone in the restroom I placed my hands on the metal counter to calm my emotions only to instinctively recoil as a loud snap and stinging sensation surged through my fingertips. Swallowing back on my frustrated rage and staring at the ceiling with tears forming in my eyes I realized that I had stupidly neglected to discharge the static electricity built up from my accidental usage of biotics. Wonderful. How many times had it been drilled into my head during my biotics lessons? Always discharge your static. Something so simple and I completely fucked that up too.

I rubbed the tears from my eyes roughly with the heels of my palms and activated the shower as warm as I could handle. If I had my way I would stay here all night under the hot spray and ignore the rest of the galaxy. Unfortunately I did need to get some sleep before first call. After washing away all the residue left behind from my failed first sexual escapade I dried off and threw on a shirt and pair of shorts with nothing underneath to let myself air out some more.

Entering the main room again, Auggie was still busy tearing into his meal and watching his vid, which had progressed into the goriest parts of the invasion. I dragged myself and my bag to my bed before throwing myself face first into it. I laid like that for a moment, just drinking in the sounds of Auggie's chewing and the gunshots,

screams and explosions coming from the vid. The smell of onion rings wasn't helping either.

I finally pulled myself up and peeled back the covers before crawling under them, turning my back to Auggie and burying my head into the pillows. I tried to block out everything in the room and about today. Was this what my future was going to be like? What the hell was I thinking joining the UNSC? Abuela's advice had been to find my own path in life and Tio Kamal's had been to never take the good times with those you loved for granted. How the hell does a day like today figure into it all?

Auggie managed to put it all into perspective when he opened his mouth again between bouts of chewing. "You should talk to that redhead, Ilyse. Man has she got a smoking hot body. She wants you man. Kept checking you out during the exam and in the waiting room and during the swearing in. Get her omnitool address tomorrow morning. Trust me. You'll be fucking that in no time."

I stared at the shadows coming from the vid display dance along the wall across from me and gritted my reply through my teeth. "Yeah. Thanks for the advice. Good night, Auggie."

"No prob. Women are going to be throwing themselves at us because we're in the UNSC."

Yep. The universe definitely hated me.

* * *

><p>Codex Entry: Citadel

The Citadel is a massive habitable structure of suspected Prothean design located within the Widow star system of the Serpent Nebula star cluster. Built around an enclosed stanford style torus known as the Presidium that is approximately [Human Translation: 19.3 km] in diameter, the station then branches out into five petal like arms known as the Wards, named Bachjret, Kithoi, Shalta, Tayseri, and Zakera. Each ward arm is approximately [Human Translation: 100 km] in length and [Human Translation: 886 m] in width.

The majority of technologies used to create and maintain this marvelous feat of astroengineering still baffle and elude the grasp of scholars and scientists across the galaxy. Master control panels throughout the station have remained unresponsive to all attempts to interface. This has left the operational functions and inner facilities of the station inaccessible. Most inhabitants have learned to accept this as reality provided that the automated functions that make the station habitable continue to operate flawlessly. These functions include a magnetic field which protects the Citadel and inhabitants from the most dangerous effects of the Widow star. The inner surfaces of each ward arm are exposed to vacuum yet are habitable with conditions favorable to most sapient species, including a nitrogen oxygen atmosphere that extends [Human Translation: 27 m] in height.

Organic beings known as Keepers serve as the station caretakers, manually repairing structures and devices throughout the habitation zones of the Citadel. They are joined by rarely seen automated drones, known as Assemblers and Constructors, that inhabit the

restricted lower levels and exterior of the Citadel where they maintain the bulk of the station's systems and megastructure.

The heart of culture, commerce, and politics for the galaxy for the past two millennia, it is hard to imagine that the station was found as a result of luck. Asari scientists scheduled the Widow star to be a prime candidate for observation and dispatched unmanned exploration probes to the system. When the probes reported the discovery of not only a mass relay but a large unidentified object within Widow's orbit, the nascent Asari Republics dispatched a deep space exploration vessel to activate the relay.

When the vessel Argonaut arrived in the system some seven months later, they were astonished to find the large unidentified object was a space station in the shape of a massive cylinder with rounded ends. The Asari wasted no time in using the activated relay to transport a team of scientists, engineers, technicians, diplomats, and commandos to make contact with the whomever might be living within. When their vessels came within range, the station released a swarm of drones similar to Assemblers and Constructors. Panicked that this was a hostile action, the asari crews evaded and withdrew to a safe distance. When the drones did not pursue the science teams began trying to establish contact. After several hours of fruitless efforts, a single vessel was used to slowly approach again. This time, when the drones swarmed, the vessel stood it's ground as they began scanning it. Recordings of the events have been examined in detail by countless scholars since but none can fully comprehend exactly what the drones did or were looking for.

Nevertheless, when the drones were finished they withdrew back into the Citadel and the ward arms unlocked, opening the station in welcome to the asari. Their initial evaluation was that this structure was an abandoned prothean space station that was still functional until they encountered Keepers. The asari teams were initially frightened by their presence, believing them to be the Protheans, only later to be frustrated by their oblivious and antisocial nature. The crews eventually surmised that they were not the Protheans but some biological automaton created to serve and that the station was truly abandoned.

Staking their claim, the asari would open the Citadel to habitation of science and security teams within several months once assured that the station was hazard free. Those initial 'colonists' would be joined by their families and clans, creating the asari collectives that are referred to as natives of the Citadel today, complete with guilds and commando forces.

When contact was established between the asari and salarians the respective governments sent delegations to the Citadel to organize introductions and diplomatic talks. The salarian delegation quickly insisted that the station be considered a galactic heritage site open to all races. The asari balked at the terms, having become accustomed to viewing the Citadel as their own. Negotiations continued for several galactic years before the first version of the Citadel Charter was signed declaring the Citadel to be a neutral territory and establishing a foundation for trade and cooperation that has influenced the laws and regulations of Citadel Space. It is during this time that a governing body for the neutral territory was created to oversee local matters for the Citadel and facilitate continued diplomatic talks. This body would be the precursor to the Citadel

Council.

In the time since, the Citadel has seen a great deal of change in the galaxy. Other races have been discovered. Some have signed the Citadel Charter. Some have been expelled. Some have been hostile. Throughout the various wars and acts of aggression that have threatened the very way of life for the civilized races of the galaxy the Citadel itself has never come under attack. It remains the steadfast bedrock that galactic commerce and culture adhere to, providing security and stability for all in even the most dire of times.

The community aboard the Citadel is a vibrant cosmopolitan mix of races, cultures, businesses, arts, education, and opportunities. Immigration is tightly controlled with waiting lists for official residency status taking on average six galactic years, although travelers on business or vacation are encouraged to visit anytime they wish as the station enjoys a robust tourism economy. Popular destinations for those visiting for enjoyment are the many exclusive and celebrated hotels, restaurants, clubs, cultural centers, arenas, and shopping zones spread throughout the Presidium and the more exclusive districts on the Wards. Those on business can enjoy the ease of access between corporate headquarters, conference centers, exhibition halls, university lecture halls, ambassadors offices, fabrication districts and heaving cargo docking stations throughout the Citadel.

Every race that signs the Citadel Charter is awarded an ambassador's suite in the Embassy block on the Presidium near the Citadel Tower. Those that sign the Treaty of Farixen are awarded a military base on one of the Wards where they may garrison a small force in exchange for accepting security duties defending the Citadel, Widow system, and Council mandated CDEM garrisons across the galaxy. The bulk of policing and security for the station falls to the Citadel Security Force, or C-Sec. This organization is open to all charter races that pass a rigorous background check and answers directly to the Citadel Council. Their directive is to maintain the peace of the station, investigate crimes, and defend the station in the event of civil unrest or invasion.

Despite the reputation for glamour and progress the station has there does exist a very prevalent and dark underbelly. Due to the high cost of living, largely attributed to the need to ship in goods, and resources, the Citadel experiences extreme levels of income inequality. Most of the population in the Wards work low or mid level jobs in the industries present, with technical, administrative and service industry work for the Council or private corporations being the most common. This becomes even more pronounced as the Citadel, namely the Presidium and select high price districts on the Wards, is an attractive location to live for the wealthy and powerful. Most who live on the station spend the majority of their pay on necessary items and services leaving little for savings. This frustration is coupled with opportunity to create a thriving black market and organized crime culture that employs the disenfranchised and fed up. C-Sec frequently breaks up these operations, but since nothing is done to seriously address the social and economic causes of this problem the work is endless and almost futile.

* * *

><p>Codex Entry: Keepers

The Keepers, [Terran Classification: Operatur Tacita] are large levo based species indigenous to the Citadel. The species was already present aboard when the first asari explorations teams discovered the ancient prothean installation. Silent and nonsocial, the keepers seem to serve as the tireless caretakers of the Citadel although it is unclear if they are a surviving species of the prothean era or a race that potentially rediscovered the facility before any other.

The Keepers are almost entirely uniform in stature and appearance, at approximately [Terran Translation: 2 meters] tall and [Terran Translation: 2.5 meters] long. Their segmented carapace is dull green in color with a lighter beige underbelly and black connective tissue. The head consists of two overly large eyes set to either side and a flat opening similar to a mouth near the chin with two dangling mandibles. The head is connected to the body by a long and slender neck with exceptional articulation, allowing for a Keeper to place their head and line of sight in many directions, including backwards.

The body consist of two primary segments: The upper torso, similar in structure to many contemporary sapient species; And the lower torso, or thorax, which is more arthropodal in design and is suspected to house a great deal of the inner organs. Attached to the back of the upper torso is a large synthetic structure resembling a hardcase pack with a thin antennae protruding from the top. At first glance the pack appears to be held to the torso via shoulder straps and vest, but further observation suggests the pack is cybernetic in nature and is directly interfaced with the flesh of the torso.

A keeper possesses eight appendages, divided equally into two sets of four limbs. The upper set are analogous to arms and are connected to the upper upper torso. These limbs have three joint locations that roughly equal the shoulder, elbow and wrist joints in most sapients. The hands of are long and narrow, tipped with three fingers, one of which that appears to function similar to a thumb but with far increased dexterity than has been exhibited in any species currently known. The lower four limbs function as legs that end in three long phalanges. The combined locomotion and gripping power of the legs and feet of a keeper have been show to provide exceptional mobility and weight carrying capacity given their size, with many documented instances of a keeper carrying or moving material double their mass along nearly vertical surfaces.

A very unique part of keeper anatomy are a series of slits on the hand that run along the length of the palm extending to each individual finger. These slits are closures for dense patches of cilia like structures that can be protruded through the length of the opening to further manipulate objects in the keeper's hand. They use these extraordinary organs to complete complex and detailed construction, repair, and maintenance tasks. When combined with the incredible dexterity of their hands the keepers have an unparalleled speed in tasks that even gives automated fabrication and construction systems with VI control a run for their credits.

Another curious nature of keepers is their ability to interface with the Citadel itself. The primary controls and functions of the Citadel have remained a mystery to the galaxy since it's discovery. The prothean based systems seem to be locked out to non protheans or

require some manner of extra sensory ability to access. This is not true for Keepers who can access the restricted bowels of the megastructure and activate master control panels, although their interaction seems to be limited to basic maintenance to the hardware and systems linked to the panels. It is unclear if the keepers fully understand the prothean language and systems or if their knowledge is implanted. Attempts to replicate their actions in order to gain further access to the Citadel or archives has resulted in failure.

This has lead to the initial false assumption that the keepers were the protheans themselves. This theory has largely been debunked as further analysis of artifacts and ruins have produced an accepted understanding that protheans were an upright bipedal race similar in size to contemporary races. Research into the possibility that keepers themselves might possess the theoretical extrasensory capability needed to access prothean technology has been inconclusive. Furthermore, the large cybernetic structure attached to the back of each keeper emits no measurable transmissions despite it's appearance as a communications device.

Keepers are not a social species, with no recorded interactions between individuals that would constitute greetings or communication. They only congregate together in order to perform larger projects, such as evidenced in 1485 [Galactic Calendar] during the cleanup of Kithoi Ward following the Sholasta accident, and even then they manage to perform these large and complex duties with no observable planning or coordination. This lack of social recognition or interaction is further displayed in their complete lack of boundaries and privacy with the races inhabiting the Citadel. Keepers are known to override the most sophisticated locking mechanisms and software to enter domiciles and businesses to rearrange furniture, causing annoyance and resigned acceptance with the population.

The most radical feature exhibited by Keepers is an organic self destruct sequence. This trait alone convinces many that the keepers are not even truly sentient but a bioengineered race created specifically to service the Citadel. The sequence activates under several conditions centered around a theme of interference or tampering: If they are physically restrained or assaulted; If there is an attempt to remotely scan them; When the keeper is fatally injured from an accident; Or the keeper is in anyway placed in a stressful situation in which it interprets individuals are hostile and aggressive threats. When these conditions are met the Keeper immediately undergoes a hypothesized glandular and cellular process which releases a non dangerous corrosive mixture. This reaction quickly reduces the keeper down to base amino acids with no discernible genetic structure left. Even more curious is the fact that Keepers already leave no trace genetic material. Attempts to find evidence of DNA or a DNA analogue on surfaces and objects handled by a Keeper have been met with no success. Because of this self destruct sequence the Citadel Council has made the accidental killing of a keeper a hefty fine and the deliberate killing a felony offense.

Based upon limited documentation and records from battlefields, Xenobiologists have noted a remarkable similarity between keepers and the rarely seen Covenant subspecies known as Huragok, including an advanced cilia structure, lack of noticeable social interaction, and an inability to obtain genetic material from the species. This has

lent credence to the theory that the Covenant potentially have a greater understanding of prothean technology than any other collective in the galaxy by creating or altering a keeper like bioengineered species. One major observed difference is that all instances of encounters with a Huragok has the species wearing a harness that functions in place of the internal self destruct sequence by detonating a strong but localized plasma based explosive that incinerates the creature. This difference is speculated to be a function of the Covenant potentially having knowledge of how to disable the internal auto destruct process in order to facilitate a more combat effective role for Huragok without running the risk of prematurely activating the sequence.

* * *

><p>Codex Entry: Protheans

The Prothean race are an enigma that continues to confound the brightest minds in the galaxy. Validating their suspected existence is a large catalog of evidence, namely the mass relays, Citadel, archives, planetary ruins, and assorted inoperable artifacts. There are even fragments of unverified degraded genetic material found at suspected prothean sites that may provide clues as to their physical nature. What can not be deduced, even with the plethora of evidence, is their true nature or even the veracity that what is suspected to be a single race was not a instead a galactic collective with a cohesive and universal culture.

So it is instead simpler to state the known facts. The protheans last inhabited the known galaxy approximately 35 to 50 thousand galactic years ago. Attempts to refine these estimates remain inconclusive given the inability to accurately date the various ruins and artifacts. The inability to use both the mass relays and Citadel to date the prothean era is surmised to be due to their automated systems constantly repairing and replacing old or damaged material. It is also suspected that the known prothean ruins were in fact young remote colonies in their time and that the areas largely currently unexplored in the galaxy due to undiscovered or dormant mass relays might be the true ancient centers of the prothean era.

What little is known comes from studying the architecture, technology, and extent of exploration of the prothean people. Prothean architecture and construction has a very smooth and almost organic feel, with an avoidance of sharp angles, emphasis on rounded contours, and polished lustrous appearance. The archives are believed to be the most intact examples of prothean construction and as a result are protected as galactic heritage sites in order to be preserved for future generations and study. Much of what is known of the prothean language has been deduced from the limited interaction with the control panels of the Citadel and archives. So far the prothean colonial ruins that have been found are small concentrations with high levels of development hinting that prothean society was excellent at maximizing efficiency in city planning capable of supporting millions but further analysis leads to the suspicion that these were simply small and young colonies or large resource extraction communities with much smaller populations.

Technologically, the prothean people were far more advanced than any current race. There is precious little paleotechnology that remains

intact or operational. The mass relays and Citadel are believed to be the final testament to their work in physics, construction, engineering, astronavigation, and intelligence programming which far exceeds the current understanding of said disciplines by any contemporary race. Unfortunately, a great deal of the operational aspect of the mass relays and Citadel remain a mystery as there has been a tremendous difficulty accessing or interacting with control systems. It is believed that prothean intelligence programming refuses to recognize non prothean sapient life forms as valid operators and thus refuses to grant access. It is also possible that prothean technology itself is based upon possible additional extrasensory abilities native to or created by protheans that prevent other races from interfacing properly. This is most fully exemplified by the archives and beacon artifacts which are rendered null and inoperable despite a variety of methods to interact and access data or functions. Curiously it is the Covenant Empire which exhibits the most advanced understanding of prothean technology, which they guard zealously with their imposed isolation, refusal to open diplomatic channels, and religious ardor.

It is the extent of exploration and habitation by protheans that provides the largest clues. The widespread network of known and activated mass relays, coupled with the possibility of a great deal more that are currently undiscovered and dormant, reveals that the protheans had explored and visited nearly every corner of the galaxy. Even more intriguing is that they must have done so over the course of possibly several hundreds of thousands of galactic years in order to expand frontiers and extend their mass relay network. And most astounding is the evidence that every current known race in the galaxy appears to have had observational facilities and a mass relay located within their indigenous star system meaning the protheans were not only masters of exploration but potentially guardians hoping to guide and welcome younger races. Some researchers contend that it is naïve to assume that the efforts of the protheans were purely benevolent, citing the irresponsible salarian uplifting of the krogan as another possibility for prothean interest in younger races. This line of inquiry has given credence to what many perceive as pop science or religious fervor in which prothean intervention played a role in the creation of the ancient mythological beliefs of contemporary galactic races. What can not be argued is that it is these long defunct observational facilities, with their dormant data archives, and the mass relays that have been gifts that provide the modern technological starting points for nearly every contemporary race as they are introduced to slipspace and mass effect physics.

However, the most important question being asked is not who the protheans were or what the motives may have been. It is why are they no longer present? This great mystery both captures the imagination and terrifies the scientific community and general population alike. There is some evidence of inhabitants of the galaxy that predate the prothean era by hundreds of thousands or even a few million galactic years. What is not known is if these civilizations were precursors to the prothean era or the protheans themselves. If they were precursors, could this be potential evidence of a galactic cycle of a rise and fall for civilizations? If so, what are the causes behind a relatively rapid and complete disappearance of technologically advanced and widely dispersed civilizations?

There are several potential hypotheses and suspected insights into

the prothean era that may provide the clues. The first questions the flawed assumption that the prothean era was the product of a single race. Strong contemporary research indicates that it is highly unlikely that the protheans were alone in inhabiting the galaxy during the era. Thus it is suspected that racial and ideological differences might have played a key role in creating divisions that fueled dissension and turbulence in the prothean era that ultimately destroyed it. These wars provide a possible explanation for the evidence of suspected heavy weapons damage in prothean ruins.

The second hypothesis comes as a combination of analysis of element zero production and mass relay function. It is suspected that the galaxy could not have produced enough element zero naturally to explain the massive amounts found in the suspected total of the entire mass relay network and still provide enough intact supplies to be harvested for galactic civilization. This has lead to the possibility that protheans were capable of producing the material synthetically or that they had access to other galaxies in order to harvest more. If the latter is true, then the assumption that the protheans were even native to our galaxy comes under question. Another possibility, given their observation and preparations of younger races, is that the protheans could have abandoned the galaxy in order to provide opportunity to new civilizations, suggesting a possible explanation for the cycle of galactic civilizations.

The third and final hypothesis comes as a combination of the previous two. If the prothean era ended amid protracted warfare over racial or ideological reasons while they had access to other galaxies and possibly observed or interfered with younger races then it is possible that a faction which opted for non intervention prevailed. If this is true then it would explain the rapid and nearly uniform end of the prothean era as this faction would have withdrawn to indigenous star clusters in galaxy or even other galaxies upon victory. A second possibility to this hypothesis is the chilling suggestion that the Covenant Empire are the protheans themselves or their cultural heirs and represent a violent and aggressive religious faction which won the warfare that ended the prothean era. If this is true then it creates more questions than it answers.

* * *

><p>Codex Entry: Red Sand

Red Sand is the street name for a series of illegal drugs in Council Space that mix psychoactive stimulants with trace amounts of element zero and temporary binding agents. It's typical appearance is that of a reddish brown powder with fine pink or rose colored crystals mixed in.

The history of the drug series dates back to research done by the human Office of Naval Intelligence, or ONI, prior to the First Contact War. Sporadic accounts of biotic phenomena had been documented in human individuals exposed to harmful levels of dust from Element Zero while gestating or as young children. Human researchers at the time had difficulty understanding the conditions behind the creation of biotic individuals and how to properly harness the potential of a biotic. It was not until after the First Contact War that humanity was learned of the galactic sciences, and laws, pertaining to biotics.

In 2522 the Turian news agency Sirenum Scopuli exposed human supersoldier programs run by ONI in an expose that rocked the galaxy. Some of the evidence obtained further implicated humanity's wrongdoing by linking Red Sand to a program run by ONI, under the ORION supersoldier project, which attempted to create biotics in the early 2400s resulting in a drug cocktail that used binding proteins with what at the time was deemed to be safe levels of Element Zero to induce biotic effects in adult soldiers. The final mixture, labeled Boren 21-7, was deemed to be a failure and the program canceled as the end product was costly, and the effects were temporary, unreliable, addictive, and ultimately lead to deadly side effects due to Element Zero toxicity.

From there the connection is not so clear, but it is speculated that after the First Contact War, and with a better understanding of biotics, ONI reopened research into biotic supersoldiers using a clandestine proxy. No solid evidence has ever been produced to verify this claim. What is known is that human organized crime syndicates based out of Mars began offering an illegal stimulant product laced with a similar mixture to Boren 21-7 by the late 2530s. The cocktail was dubbed Red Sand in honor of the iron oxide prevalent on the planet and because shipments of the narcotic were first discovered hidden alongside Hawaiian Red Salt that was being transported from Earth to various markets across the galaxy.

Today several variants of the original Red Sand have been produced that are tailored to the chemical requirements of different species but all have some manner of artificial coloring added to give the iconic Red Sand appearance that has become well known in galactic culture. The mixtures consist of the binding agents, trace amounts of Element Zero, and species specific chemical cocktails that typically induce increases in euphoria, arousal, sociability, empathy, and energy levels. These desired effects, combined with the drug's taboo nature, has been parlayed into a status as one of the premiere hedonistic drugs frequently found at large social events. The biggest draw, of course, is the ability to introduce transitory and weak biotic effects in non biotic individuals. Unfortunately, the drug represents a potential biotic hazard as intoxicated individuals with no prior biotic experience or training in these large social settings can easily harm themselves, others, and property.

Because of the danger to users and the public, Red Sand is prohibited in all civilized sectors of the galaxy for safety concerns. This danger is exacerbated by the haphazard nature of production and sales of Red Sand by drug cartels. The original ONI program noted that the composition of binding agents needed to be adjusted given slight differences in mass and chemical composition of an individual to maximize desired effects and avoid harmful ones. Combined with the toxicity of Element Zero and the average batch of Red Sand procured from a criminal vendor is bound to be a one dose fits all mixture that could potentially be lethal for any individual. To compensate for this, production teams often up the dosage of the psychoactive stimulants in order to mask the threat and increase the probability of addiction in usage.

Fortunately, with the prices of Element Zero so high, there are increasing incidences of street vendors selling batches of Red Sand that contain no Element Zero at all. Since the drug almost exclusively attracts non biotics and there is no guarantee biotic effects will manifest, users are typically none the wiser that they

have been swindled. Given the criminal nature of Red Sand sales there is little chance of a refund or exchange.

Red Sand is believed to represent 2% of all smuggling operations into Council Space by Terminus piracy and up to 5% of organized criminal activity in Council Space with only Asari sectors of the galaxy having little activity or usage given their natural biotic nature. The most interesting angle of Red Sand production and sales is the procurement of Element Zero. The usage of refined Element Zero for something as trivial as recreational drug consumption would seem to most to be a bizarre waste of the expensive and rare commodity. Drug cartels and crime syndicates would be forced to operate their own extraction and refinement facilities in order to avoid being tracked as a purchaser of Element Zero, but this investment would make using the element for narcotics counterproductive when they would be able to sell it at a much higher profit for legitimate purposes. Thus it is believed that a large portion of Element Zero that is seized by piracy is sold to Red Sand production facilities and keeps costs low. This has lead to intelligence agencies and Council Spectres to focus on dismantling piracy rings that specialize in attacking eezo freighters as the most effective way to stem the tide of Red Sand production while simultaneously protecting Element Zero production for the galaxy.

9. Reaching A New Low

****AN: Thanks to those of you sticking around as this story finally starts getting on track.****

****One of my goals for this entire story is to show that the myth of the heroic and natural born warrior surrounding Shepard is made up. It's part legend because of his incredible exploits and part propaganda from human sources to hype one of their greatest icons. By now you will have noticed I have given him quite the large array of personal issues that will only deepen and help define him as his military career goes on.****

****He's going to mature and become exceptional as a leader and combatant as he grows older and more experienced, but the learning process will be painful and you're going to see sides of Shepard that will make him seem less than noble. He's going to whine and be pessimistic. He's going to have issues with self esteem. He's going to say the wrong things and get himself into situations he could have avoided. He's going to get frustrated with things outside of his control. He's going to have emotional hangups relating to his family, alive and dead. In other words, he's going to be human.****

****My hope is that by the time the real focus of the story begins you understand how he can become a paragon style special forces soldier who effortlessly commands respect and leadership from those that work with him and can empathize with those he encounters across the galaxy. He's going to be intelligent and cynical enough to recognize the angles of politics and economics that drive much of the conflicts he's involved in. He'll recognize that not everyone he fights is his enemy, but they're enemies of the Systems Alliance and Citadel Council. He's going to have a renegade streak in him that surfaces when he's truly pissed or dealing with subjects that touch a nerve. He's going still going to be that big goofy kid from an outer colony farming planet that never thought he'd be in the thick of saving the**

galaxy.**

And if you pay attention to his dream sequences throughout the story, you'll see he's getting some help.

* * *

><p>Dodola Orbital Station, Reach, Epsilon Eridani, Orior Cluster; June 25th, 2572 [Standardized Terran Calendar], 1937 [Local Time, Terran Standard]

I had hoped my luck would take a change for the better when my trip ended at the space station tethered above Manassas. Apparently the UNSC Air Force thought differently. As the uniformed asshole yelled out names and assigned group numbers I mused to myself that after less than thirty minutes on Reach my theory that the universe hated me was looking more and more accurate.

After having been rushed through the decon and screening process I was lumped in with a larger group of recruits and guided with more of that polite and courteous military manner towards the deck the UNSC occupied on the station. Did everyone in the military have to be a humorless asshole pissed off with the galaxy and everything in it?

Wait. Was I going to turn into a humorless asshole pissed off with the galaxy and everything in it?

That train of thought came to grinding halt at the sight of the Air Force dock. A large hangar housing rows upon rows of dropships, shuttles, and fighters. All around them uniformed personnel scuttled about performing maintenance and resupply. Overhead a large dropship cast an imposing shadow over our large group as the automated ceiling mounted crane system moved it from its berth and into a launch bay. The staccato sounds of tools being used and loud conversations being had pierced the air over the steady thrum of thrusters and engines warming up.

The last time I had seen this much activity in one place had been in the aftermath of Mindoir. The UNSC had been there for that, too. I'm not quite sure how I felt about seeing it again, but I needed to get used to it, right? This is my job now.

Most of the group was so giddy with the beginning of their military experience that they gladly complied with the insultingly brusque commands and rushed towards their assigned dropship. A few of us, like myself, were more hesitant. Perhaps they had their own bad experiences? Or just a fear of heights or flying?

Still, we had joined the UNSC and here we were. Finally starting our military careers in style with a real combat vehicle. Not some slowpoke tether elevator or commercial transport.

Admittedly I wasn't completely put out by the situation. There was a small thrill of excitement that went through me that eased my discomfort as the rear door slowly raised and sealed with a quiet hiss. A dull red light flickered on, illuminating the interior and bathing everything in crimson highlighted by black shadow. The dropship vibrated and shifted as the engines activated and the automated crane system clamped down to move us to a launch bay.

Static electricity tingled my body as the eezo core began it's job of lightening the mass of the vehicle. Enough to make me roll my neck and shoulders the best I could while secured tightly in my harness.

I tried thinking back to my only other experience aboard a UNSC dropship, but I found the details... lacking. Looking back, so many details were fuzzy. I chalked it up to the exhaustion, fear and overwhelming shock I felt that day.

Or maybe I was just suppressing the memories.

I couldn't remember what we had for breakfast or what we talked about during the trip to Nouveau Basel. But other specific moments were ingrained into my mind with stark and vivid precision. The way that woman had begged with her eyes for us not to leave her. The feeling of the asari's pistol pressing into my neck as she growled in her heavily accented English. And the lifeless way my mother's eyes gazed off into the distance as her body lay a few meters from the home she had lived in for nearly two decades and raised three children.

Shaking my head, I chastised myself for delving into negative thoughts and made an effort to put the past where it belonged. I was here and I was going to be a Marine. And judging from the way everything felt weightless, I was about to experience my first orbital insertion. How cool was that?

Not very cool at all, actually.

Now, I've exited and entered orbit plenty of times. Been a passenger in an orbital transport or tether elevator as it zipped through the atmosphere of a planet. Who hasn't? It was a regular everyday part of life. But none of that prepared me for the free fall of a military dropship.

Scratch that. The accelerated dive of a military dropship.

When they say 'dropship' they mean it. Less than ten minutes from GSO to tropo. I'm positive my stomach is still somewhere in the mesosphere between Dodola station and Manassas.

One of the other recruits didn't even bother with being figurative and introduced the contents of her stomach to the interior of the troop bay. It looked suspiciously like one of those breakfast wrap type things that transports try to sell for cheap. The partially digested mushrooms and eggs sort of gave it away.

Another neat thing to find out was that vomit has interesting ways of getting everywhere during a drop. Like along the right pant leg of my coveralls. The things you learn. I'm certain the single flight crewman was overjoyed judging from the way he just glared at the poor girl who had barfed all over the inside of his troop bay.

Once the dropship ended it's insane dive and leveled out the rear door finally opened to let in some much welcome fresh air. Right away we were hit with the overpowering smell of pine and cedar trees mingled in with the blast of the chilling temperature outside. I had to shield my eyes from the sudden rush of cold wind and harsh glare as I adjusted to the sunlight of Epsilon Eridani after being aboard a

transport for a week and then the dimly lit troop bay of this dropship.

Blinking away tears and the spots in my vision, I was finally able to take in the amazing view. A dozen or so of the other dropships flew behind our own as we descended between high mountain passes capped with snow. Spread out as far as I could see, the lower slopes and valleys were filled with thick forests of dark green trees. No doubt the source of the smell. In the valley floor below was a large river that shined blue and gold as it twisted and turned through a series of rapids. Our dropships seemed to be following it's path and if I squinted I could make out a network of roads and buildings tracing the river through the dense forest as well.

My stunned amazement slowly dulled as my shivering increased. I'm not the least bit hesitant to admit it. I dislike the cold and I had been fortunate enough to have lived all my life on two warm worlds. If this was where I would be spending the next few months, then I was not going to be enjoying the weather. Gazing around the troop bay, it would seem most of my fellow recruits had the same idea. Everyone looked pale and cold. Well, everyone except Miss Upchuck herself who still looked a bit grayish green.

Another twenty minutes and the dropship banked to the right, upsetting my stomach once again as it descended into a large clearing surrounded by a vast complex of buildings. The flight crewman jumped from his seat the instant the skids touched the grassy field to began barking at us in that military manner that I was beginning to believe was the only way any of them knew how to talk. "Listen up! Seat restraints have been disabled! Undo them and grab your gear! Exit in single file and follow all instructions from the people on the field! Welcome to Reach and thank you so fucking much for redecorating the inside of my dropship, nubs!"

Troops clad in the standard blue and gray uniforms of the UNSC wearing black caps and red brassards stood a safe distance away from the dropships. Their gestures were aggressive as they yelled over the roar of the dropships to quickly move to their location. As I exited my dropship I could feel the welcome rush of extremely hot air being vented from the thrusters but all too quickly I was out of range as I was forced to run to keep up with my group. Looking back at the ten dropships parked on the large field I tried to calculate just how many of us there were. If there had been been twenty recruits including myself aboard the Pelican that I rode in that gave me an estimate of two hundred.

Glancing around me as we were gathered and waiting for our names to be called I figured that was a good guess to our number. Focusing my attention back on the troops there seemed to be four separate lists with names, starting at different points in the alphabet. After several names were called I quickly realized that the dark skinned woman to the far left had started with the R's and would be working her way to the S's and me.

Having nothing better to do I took the time to examine the rest of the recruits. I couldn't be certain, but I got the feeling not all of my group from the Citadel MEPS was here. I guess that made sense, Reach was the primary military colony for the human race. There were probably training bases everywhere on this planet. Of course that meant that the majority of these recruits came from other colonies

and clusters.

Before I could get further lost in my musings, my ears heard what sounded like the start of my name being called, but it proved to be a false alarm. A tall skinny guy named Sharma about four people to my left pushed his way forward. Figuring I would be up next, I tighten my hold on my bag and took a deep breath. My heart began to pound in my chest as I wondered how silly it was that I was nervous just to have my name called.

"Shepard, Luis Vincent!" She managed to mangle my first name, but I rolled my eyes and jogged forward, stopping before her as she ran her omnitool over me. A quick haptic display with a read out of my identitag was quickly skimmed over as she compared it to what was on her datapad. After a moment she frowned and sniffed the air until she pointedly looked at me. She gave me a disgusted look then rolled her eyes and shook her head slowly. She didn't even bother to speak to me when she was done verifying my information, instead jerking her head slightly behind her and towards the others who were sitting in the grass waiting for the rest to be checked in.

Taking a seat on the outskirts of the group, I blew out a breath and tried to rub the residue of vomit off my leg into the grass. All I did was manage to rub a grass stain into my coveralls. Figuring my best option was to just live with it for the time being I looked out across the field and the surroundings only to have a slight pang of nostalgia.

Despite the cooler temperature I was reminded of home back on Mindoir. Small clusters of colonial development tucked into kilometers of pristine untouched wilderness. The field was a wide open space big enough for the ten dropships, the two hundred or so of us, and still had plenty of space to spare. A dirt running track that several groups of people were using rimmed the edge of the field. Beyond that were several clusters of buildings where I could see vehicles and people moving about. Further to right I could hear more than see a group of recruits marching and singing as they emerged from around the bend of a road that lead into the forest. Finishing off the picturesque setting was the tall snowy mountains encompassing the valley we were in and a bright blue sky dotted with thick puffy clouds.

No obnoxious metropolitan settings. No teeming masses of the oblivious and ignorant. No heavy traffic and skycars zooming back and forth in sky lanes. No flashing neon holographic advertisements pushing products and services you didn't want or need. No overload of automated systems that tracking and controlling everything you did or used.

So, yeah, as far as places to live for training go this wasn't bad. I mean, the temperature was cooler than I liked and I dreaded just how freezing it would be at night or early in the morning, but still I could get used to it. About as rustic and isolated as a small outer colony. Enough to fool you into believing that you were not on one of the most populated colony worlds in the Systems Alliance. In fact I think only Eden Prime and Elysium had larger populations than Reach. Rather beautiful and peaceful. So tranquil, in fact, that I started to zone out staring at the mountains and picking at bits of grass around me.

"On your feet!"

The yelled command bounced me from my own little world and the scrambling of my fellow recruits put me into a herd mentality where I rushed to follow their example. It seems that our group had been checked in and were ready to move on. A large mustached man with dark and brooding features had been the one to yell and get our attention. His uniform was similar to the rest bore patches and badges which I couldn't even begin to understand. He eyed us all critically, almost contemptuously, before waving a tall woman forward.

Her uniform was more decorative with shiny gold and silver accents. The awards and medals vibrantly popped against the blue and gray of the uniform. Everything about her just screamed professional and poised, including the calm and controlled way she stood before us with her head held high and hands loosely behind her back. Clearing her throat to address us, she spoke quickly and concisely "I am UNSC Army Captain Cho. You are all now part of UNSC Training Facility Thirteen, Ninth Training Battalion, Echo Company. My company. These troops are from Headquarters Company and will be escorting you through the rest of the orientation process. Three hours from now you will be formally handed over to my self and my chief NCO, First Sergeant Yilmaz. Until that time you are to comply with their every command." She paused, expecting a question or disagreement. When none came, she smiled slightly and nodded, "Good. I look forward to helping train you all into the next generation of humanity's defenders."

With that she turned on her heel and marched back towards the buildings on the far side of the field. The large man, First Sergeant Yilmaz, gave us all one more cursory glance with his narrowed eyes before jogging to catch up with her. I watched them go for a few more seconds before I was shocked out of my reverie again by another yelled command.

"Recruits! Let's move! Grab your gear!" One of the headquarters staff screamed. Once again we all responded like a nervous herd startled into a stampede as we grabbed our bags and were encouraged to run as a group towards the buildings.

Once there my wonderful day and luck continued. We were directed to drop our bags inside of a large reception hall and told to form into groups of ten. My group had the wonderful distinction of being the first taken across a covered walkway to a smaller building adjacent to the hall. Once inside I noticed the small room was bland with only overhead lighting and a number of drones stored in storage lockers lining the far wall.

Our handler stood by the doorway and lifted his arm to activate his omnitool. The drones whirred to life and he smiled maliciously as he gave us a word of advice, "Don't. Move."

The drones shot from their storage lockers and circled our heads, mapping us with scans before a warm sensation tingled my scalp. I frowned as a lock of my hair floated down past my face followed by the rest in a deluge that fell about my ears, nose, lips, and shoulders. Then the drone moved it's attention to my face and the warm tingle became a slightly scalding sting.

In less than thirty seconds we had been shaved and traumatized.

The drones stopped in their task and blew hot air from their thrusters to knock loose the hair. Once done they returned to their storage lockers. The handler clapped his hands, gesturing with a mocking smile for us to follow him back to the main hall, "Not bad. You almost look like soldiers. Once you get some sun on those scalps they won't look so sickly and pale."

After that we were lead to a larger facility further away that served as a warehouse where I was issued a duffel bag, a large backpack, a hard shell pack, and a footlocker. I was a bit confused as to why I would be needing this as I already had my luggage back at the reception hall.

My unasked question was answered as the staff of the warehouse and their automated VI retrieval system matched my measurements to a steadily growing pile of gear I would need for training. Uniforms. Armor. A helmet. Physical training gear. Boots. Shoes. Toiletries. They even issued me underwear, which was in this hideous drab olive green color that I was positive was designed to be able to hide evidence of an accident.

Moving all this gear back to the reception hall in one trip was an almost herculean task that left me exhausted and gasping for breath. Leaning over with my hands on my knees I curiously began to wonder if this was it or if more horrors and trials awaited me. I was saved from my imagination and idle speculation when I our group was called forward yet. We exited the hall and followed our handler across a courtyard of sorts where I could clearly see the hustle and bustle of the training facility up close. Groups of recruits stood in formations or marched here and there. The smell of food wafted from a nearby building, causing my stomach to rumble in anticipation that we were going to be fed, but my hopes were dashed when we made a turn in the opposite direction towards another building.

As I entered the familiar smell of a medical facility stung my nose. Flashbacks to all the times I would visit my mother at the hospital on Mindoir flooded my mind. While that place had been warm and inviting to invoke a sense of calm and peace in the patients, this place clearly went another direction.

It was a small waiting room with plain concrete walls and a metal floor. Several doors lined the walls and lead to what I could only assume were the examining rooms and offices. Overly bright lighting gave everything a cold and sterile feel with minimal fuss. Rows of gray plastic seats that looked uncomfortable were arranged in a way that reminded me of the way everything I had seen so far about how this place was organized. Neat. Orderly. Plain. Military.

We were told to sit in a row near the back and wait for our names to be called. I sat down and rubbed my raw jaw and chin for what seemed like the millionth time since it had been shaven by laser. Observing the other recruits I noticed they were just as miserable as I was with varying expressions of shock and discomfort. Glancing back around the room I began worrying what could happen to you here that medigel wouldn't fix? I tried thinking back to the blur of being aboard the Einstein following the raid on Mindoir, but I couldn't remember the people or setting being as cold and lifeless. Maybe that was because they knew they were comforting civilians who had just gone through hell? Or maybe the UNSC's lack of humor or compassion

extended to the medical treatment of their own?

I was proven correct when a tall blonde man with a caduceus emblazoned on his brassard entered the room and called my named, "Shepard, Luis Vincent!"

I stood and made my way to him, observing the nametag on his uniform as Mladenovic. Taking one look back at my fellow group of recruits and their fearful expressions gave me the feeling of a condemned man walking towards his execution. Turning my head back around I noticed one of the recruits who had been present before we arrived was slowly leaning forward in her seat as exhaustion gripped her, only for Mladenovic to calmly jolt her awake with a swift kick to the chair without even bothering to look at the recruit or break his stride.

Figuring he'd do something just as worse to me for lagging behind, I quickened my pace to follow him through an automatic doorway that responded to his presence and into an adjoining hallway. Coming to a stop in front of another door he keyed in his credentials with his omnitool revealing a small small examination room. He gestured for me to stand next to the examination table while he continued to review files on his omnitool and grab the necessary tools needed.

When I saw him pull out an autoinjector and several vials from a refrigerated unit my curiosity was peaked but a medical assistance drone buzzed into my line of sight. I jerked my head back, confused and apprehensive as to why this drone was coming suspiciously close about my head, scanning me and sending readings to his datapad. I had already been shaved and none of the drones my mother, or any other doctor that I knew of, were this invasive of personal space.

My attention was brought back to Mladenovic as he paused in his work to look about the room with a frown. Glancing at the vents he asked "Do you smell something?"

I frowned and sniffed, trying to smell whatever was bothering him. All I could smell was the disinfectant and maybe a slight tinge of vomit.

Oh.

Slowly it dawned on me what the offending smell he was referring to was. Bashfully I pointed to my pant leg, which he narrowed his eyes at, trying to discern what he was looking at. When he realized, he sighed, shook his head and turned slightly to activate a small device on a counter nearby. The room was soon bathed in an orange glow more powerful than the haptic display coming from his omnitool.

A sterile field generator. I recognized that too from visiting my mother. Mladenovic paid it no attention as he continued reading the files. When the sterilization ceased, he shut his omnitool off and deactivated the medical drone, "Open your coveralls and remove your left arm."

He then turned away as he prepared the automated injector. I quickly did as asked and got a better glimpse of the vials. Squinting to see their labels, I could make out the words Bravo and Marsgene. Being around Abuelo long enough I knew what this was. The genetic upgrade package given to UNSC personnel. I could only guess that I was going

to be given a specific augmentation based upon my MVC code.

"Hold still. This is going to sting a bit." I braced myself as I had a pretty good idea how much this was going to hurt. Something you got used to with a mother who was a doctor was injections.

The quick sharp jab of the autoinjector was fairly benign, but the blooming and searing pain that spread as the cocktail was introduced to my body was the real kicker. I squeezed my eyes shut as I rode out the initial wave, and then breathed a sigh of relief through my nose as it slowly settled into a bearable if not irritating dull heat and throbbing that traveled up my arm into my chest and made my fingers tingle. He chuckled at my response and commented on my progress. "Not bad. A lot gasp or cry, but then again we're not over. Remove your right arm now."

I opened my watery eyes and saw him preparing the next vial. My eyes went back to the counter and I despaired at seeing how many more were left. His chuckles returned as he held the autoinjector aloft and taunted me, "One down, four more to go."

* * *

><p>UNSC Training Facility Thirteen, Highland Mountains Military Training Grounds, Vierry Territory, Reach, Epsilon Eridani, Orior Cluster; June 25th, 2572 [Standardized Earth Calendar], 2402 [Local Time, Terran Standard]

I shivered as my shaved head was freezing in the night time air of this place. Actually, all of me was freezing, but my distinct lack of hair was really pressing at the moment. So was my hunger, as we'd had only been given tubes of ossilber paste and bottles of water to tide us over about an hour ago. Then there was the entire exhaustion angle adding to my miserable state. My entire body was sore from the injections and the extra twenty kilos or so of gear I was carrying around didn't help either.

But it had all culminated with this. Now we were standing outside in a well lit courtyard next to a large two story buildings on the western end of the training facility. Shaped like two intersecting bars to make a cross and served as the barracks for each company of recruits. The ground floor was for our drill instructors and company leadership. There were offices, an armory, and storage units. The upper floors were the actual barracks themselves, with each 'wing' of the building representing a different platoon.

We stood by, waiting with baited breath that we could actually see in every exhale for our UCMT training company to receive and escort us to our barracks for the night.

And the longer they made us wait, the more irritated we felt. Even the beautiful display of auroras in the sky wasn't helping to make me or anyone else feel better.

Finally a door opened on the ground floor and a group of men and women walked out, flanking Captain Cho and First Sergeant Yilmaz as they marched forward. They stopped as one before us and waited. The Captain suddenly grinned and was excessively chirpy, "I'd say you had a long day, recruits. Right?"

There were murmurs of agreement but she paid them no heed, continuing her oddly upbeat speech, "Well, I want to thank you all for being so patient and following instructions. Now, seeing as how it's late and we all have a big day tomorrow, we'll skip the boring stuff and get you sorted into your platoons." She looked over her shoulder at the drill instructors who suddenly had large grins on their faces. "I'll leave you in the capable hands of my staff. Any order given by them is to be obeyed to the letter. Is that understood?"

Again, there were more lethargic and annoyed responses, and yet again her smile became larger, but this time it was accompanied by a slightly manic look in her eyes. "I'm going to assume this lack of enthusiasm is from a long and disorienting day combined with some slipstream lag. Nothing a good night's rest won't cure." She clapped her hands suddenly and smiled deviously, "First formation is at zero five hundred hours. Dress is the physical training uniform given to you. Be ready to start off the day right. Have a wonderful night, recruits." With a final nod she turned and walked back towards the building, leaving us with the drill instructors and the chief NCO.

Without waiting a beat, First Sergeant Yilmaz yelled "Recruits! On the ground you will see a series of alphanumeric tags painted. We will be sending a unique tag to your omnitool shortly. You will then have thirty Terran seconds to find your corresponding tag on the ground and stand on it."

Not bothering to make sure we knew what the hell he was talking about, the First Sergeant activated his omnitool and punched in a command. A split second later, all omnitools activated with a haptic display of a flashing alphanumeric number. My own read as C35. I stared at it for a second and then looked down to see where I was. Just to the left of me was a D16 but before I could look up to see where I was supposed to go I was shoved forcefully as someone crashed into me. It took me a second to realize, but absolute chaos had erupted among the recruits as they tried to maneuver themselves and their gear in a panic.

I reached down and grabbed my own gear, only to be whacked upside the head by someone's errant elbow as they shoved their way past me. Shaking the blow off and grabbing my gear I bulldozed my way past others, not sure I was headed in the right direction but determined to at least make an effort.

A voice sounded over the cacophony, urging us on "Move it, recruits! We don't have all night!"

Looking down I saw the number D12. So the numbers were going down? That was a good sign. I think.

I continued to push and shove my way past others only to be on the receiving end of more random knees, elbows and wildly slung bags. But at the very least I had made it to the C's now.

Another voice chastised us for our slow progress, "This ain't slipstream physics, recruits! Find your damn spot!"

Finally making it near my number I noticed the path had cleared a bit more as others had stopped moving, having found their place. My arms felt like they would fall off and the blood pooling in my feet was

causing them to swell and throb, but I made it to C35. Dropping everything I took in deep greedy breaths of the frigid night air that burned at the back of my throat.

My attention was drawn to the front as the beeping noise of an alarm going off pierced through the otherwise silent night.

First Sergeant Yilmaz deactivated the alarm and looked mildly impressed, raising his eyebrows in shock before looking over his shoulder at his drill instructors to gauge their reactions.

The first to respond was a tall and muscular dark skinned man, who looked as shocked as the First Sergeant. "Well I'll be damned."

Beside him a paler woman with black hair agreed with her fellow drill instructor, "Yeah, never seen that before."

Another instructor, a severe looking woman with a tan complexion and short brown hair, mused aloud, "You think the Alliance Ministry of Education is finally teaching kids how to count?"

"Even a vorchas gets shit right occasionally. My guess is they got lucky." One drill instructor didn't seem so sure. The bored expression on his face made it even more evident.

The severe looking drill instructor brightened, her face alight with a smile as she joked "Maybe that'll rub off on us? Who wants to go in on some Lucky 88 tickets?"

Shaking his head at their banter, the First Sergeant gruffly brought the discussion to an end, "Ease the chatter. Talk about that on your own time." He turned to face us and returned to the glower that seemed to be common place on his face. "Ladies and gentleman. Boys and girls. You are now a part of Highland Mountains Unified Combined Military Training Battalion Nine, Echo Company. This will be your home for the next sixteen weeks."

With a gesture to his drill instructors, they stepped forward to claim us. The first was the light skinned woman with black hair, "Those of you with alphanumeric tags starting with the letter A, welcome to first platoon. Follow me."

The dark skinned male drill instructor took her exit as his turn, calling for second platoon. "Bs, on me. And act like you know what the fuck a line is."

The dismissive drill instructor from before stepped forward, a short, stocky man with a permanent shadow of stubble along his jaw and a shaved head under his black cap. His blue eyes scanned my group before speaking impatiently "Well? Don't just stand there Cs. I don't know about you shitbricks but I want to get to sleep at a decent hour tonight."

Still exhausted from before, I begrudgingly grabbed my bags and followed the rest of my new platoon in a line as we were lead around the building towards another stairwell on the far side. Dimly lit and cramped, we moved up slowly as the long day had taken its toll. My feet felt like they were filled with rocks, making each step a painful effort.

A the top of the stair well was a sizable landing with a large door. Our Drill Instructor stood by it and ran his hand over it the haptic lock. The door opened to a dark and cavernous room. I could only make out nearby bunk beds and lockers.

"VI, lights." The entire barracks was illuminated to reveal the full extent of the room. Our 'home' would be one massive room with walls made of concrete and brick. Dark metal plates ran the length of the floor and ceiling, giving me the feeling of being back in some prefabricated dwelling on a frontier colony. A row of bunk beds with adjoining lockers lined either side of the room. At the far end I could make out two doors leading to what I could only assume were restrooms and showers. Our Drill Instructor stood just beyond the doorway, glaring at us. With the bright lighting behind him and the lack of lighting in the stair well I couldn't make out his nametag.

"Enter the barracks but do not touch anything. Do not put your bags down. Stay here near the hatch." We followed his instructions and entered. I felt soothed by the small comfort of no longer being outside in the cold. Our Drill Instructor walked further down the barracks, stopping half way in the empty expanse at the center of the room and turning around to face us again. "There are 50 beds and there are 50 of you. You have less than twenty seconds to find a bed and stand by it. Move."

Yet again there was a rush of shoving and pushing as we all made a mad dash for the nearest bunks. Pileups happened left and right, people starting to argue over who arrived first which gave me the wild idea to pick the farthest set of bunks, figuring everyone else would be scrambling for the next available beds.

Pushing past the rest, I got ahead and made a mad dash for the end of the barracks with my bags and gear, whipping past my Drill Instructor who turned to look at me as I ran by. He shook his head and continued to scoff at his platoon. "Your own bunk, shitbricks. There will be no cuddling at night in my barracks."

I made it to the end of the barracks and dropped my bags only to feel someone slam into me. Turning to look I was puzzled to see Galen next to me. Looking past him I had seen that even though I had made it here first, the rest of the platoon had followed in my wake. I frowned at Galen who looked equally annoyed to be sharing a bunk bed with me for the duration of UCMT.

"Freeze!" Everyone paused and looked at our Drill Instructor who was on the verge of a furious explosion. He glanced at the few who had yet to find a bunk and snarled at them in a barley controlled voice "Get to a fucking open bunk. Now."

The terrified recruits quickly found open spots and settled in. The Drill Instructor began pacing up and down the barracks like an angry predator, daring anyone to make eye contact with him. After several laps he snorted and shook his head, mocking us, "I knew it. Pure luck."

Centering himself in the middle of the barracks again, he raised his voice and addressed us as a whole, "This is third platoon barracks and as some of you geniuses might have guessed that makes all of you

third platoon. My name is Chief Petty Officer Moises Bramante and I will be your platoon leader, drill instructor, personal tormentor, and the object of your hatred for the duration of your stay here. Following me so far?"

Just as with Captain Cho, there was a chorus of yeahs, uh huhs and a few sures. I'm positive a 'yep' slipped from my lips although at this point I was struggling just to stay awake.

Turns out, while Captain Cho wasn't concerned with our lack of enthusiasm, Drill Instructor Bramante was. "What the fuck was that? Is that jumplag I hear? Feeling a little sleepy from your long trip? Need mommy or daddy to tuck you in with a bedtime story?"

The barley contained fury from before was unleashed as his voice reached ear splitting levels as he berated us. "This might be third platoon but I accept nothing but the best! Number one, recruits! Now sound off with a refreshing 'yes, drill instructor' or I'll star the physical training portion of you education right fucking now!"

And just as before, the herd mentality kicked in as we all blurted out 'Yes, Drill Instructor'.

Even to my ears it sounded horrible. A jumbled mess. More like several people trying to talk over one another.

If Drill Instructor Bramante was upset before, then this had only helped him reach higher levels of pissed off. "Oh. Hell. No." He chuckled humorlessly and shook his head in disbelief, "That sounded like shit. Maybe you do need a little bedtime story. I like to call this one 'Therapy for Recto Cranial Inversion.' Once upon a time there was a platoon of shitbricks that had their heads up their asses. But then they were acquainted with the floor. That's when they learned to love her, hug her, kiss her and get sweaty with her because she's the only action they're gonna get in my barracks. Hit the deck, recruits!"

He dropped to the floor and we quickly mimicked his high plank form under his withering gaze. "Now when I say down you are to lower yourself to the floor and hold until I say up. When I say up you are to return to the starting position and yell out the current repetition number. Now, dooooooown."

My arms burned and my head felt light, but I complied, lowering myself to the floor. Shaking from exhaustion, I tried looking out across the barracks and was bolstered to see that everyone was just as pitiful as I was. Some even worse.

"Up!" I used all the force I could muster to raise myself off the floor and yell 'one' alongside my platoon. And even to my own ears it sounded horrible.

Turns out our Drill Instructor wasn't impressed either. "Well I suppose that the therapy isn't kicking in yet because your voices still have that head up your ass sound. Let's do that first one over again. Doooooown."

Yeah. Today is turning out to be a fantastic day.

* * *

><p>UNSC Training Facility Thirteen, Highland Mountains Military Training Grounds, Vierry Territory, Reach, Epsilon Eridani, Orior Cluster; June 26th, 2572 [Standardized Terran Calendar], 0437 [Local Time, Terran Standard]

"You're not even going to try?" My mother's voice was equal parts annoyed and dismayed. They had been arguing again. Well, more like she had been pestering him and he fumed in silence.

She wanted him to get an education. Be more than just a farmer on Mindoir, which was ridiculous. It's not like farming was something for idiots. There was a lot of work and brainpower involved. My father's intelligence shined through in his handling of everything. From picking the right stuff to grow so we made the most money from selling it come harvest or managing our water and supplies. It was easy to see how an educated and sophisticated woman like my mother had been drawn to my father. His mind and willpower could handle anything thrown at him without any special training. A master of learning things quickly as he went along.

Still, it wasn't enough. I was too young to understand at the time, but in retrospect it was easy to see the influence of her family. The constant reminders and comments from relatives about the choices she'd made with her life. It's not that she agreed with them or thought so little of him. She loved him. Believed in him and knew he could achieve so much more. So she pressured and cajoled my father, believing he would see things her way eventually. He never did.

I would always go outside when they got this way. They never laid a hand on one another or tore into each other verbally. But there would be this suffocating tension. It was palpable. Two obstinate people that loved each other too much to say what they were really thinking. Lizzy would disappear to a friend's house and Ari would be upstairs playing in her room. But I needed to be free from the confines of the prefabricated walls and my parent's passive aggressive behavior. I suppose that's why I preferred venturing out to the conservatories when I lived with my grandparents.

The warm air of a Mindoir night felt wonderful, that mixture of heat and humidity combined with the clear sky that made it pleasant to be outside. Above me the sky was filled with stars. A road map to the galaxy. Only a few hundred years ago it was the realm of science fiction to believe that humanity would be spread out among them. That in doing so we would leave behind all of our collective troubles. Be better and smarter than the generations before us.

I snorted. The stars filling the sky for me were vastly different than anything my ancestors on Earth ever saw, but the problems still remained. Family drama. Taxes. Wars. Greed. Your favorite sports team never winning the championship. All that really changed was adding aliens and better ways to kill each other into the mix.

The door opened behind me and my father stepped outside, his face contorted in repressed rage. He saw me looking at him and paused. The ire gradually receded and was replaced with embarrassment. He didn't like showing weakness in front of me or my sisters. The man had quite a bit of pride but I guess that was understandable. Since he'd left that orphanage he'd been looking out for himself in some of the roughest parts of the galaxy. It was probably also why he reacted the

way he did to my mother when she pushed him on the topic.

We stayed awkwardly silent, gazing at each other and then the night sky. Neither of us knew what to say so we opted for silence, and it occurred to me this was the standard operating procedure for him with my mother as well.

He cleared his throat and prodded me with a safe line of questioning, "Did you do your homework already?" I turned to look at him and stared into his blue eyes. It was a lame question and he knew it. He might as well have asked me about the weather, but at least he was trying.

Shrugging in response I replied "Yeah, mostly. I still need to start on my project."

He nodded and tore his gaze away, looking back to the stars. "Something about the original colonies, right?"

"Yeah. I don't know which one to do." It was the truth. I might have been a procrastinator by nature, but none of the early 'Inner' colonies really appealed to me. At least, not enough to do a project on one of them.

"Mars is nice. So is Luna. Then there's Reach and Harvest. Well, before it was glassed." He ticked off a few. Places he had probably visited, no doubt. My mind wandered to my own future and if I would ever leave Mindoir to see the rest of the galaxy myself.

I quirked my lips and shrugged, still not sure what to pick but my habits for procrastination and picking the easy path shined through. "I don't know. Maybe I'll do it on Demeter. There's nothing really there. All I'd have to do is talk about the Manswell Expedition. Should be simple."

He sighed and looked back at the house, frowning before advising me. "Just don't wait until the last minute. Your mother is upset as it is." I could see the uneasy stress return in his body with the protective hunch forward in his shoulders. His head slightly lowered as his sight was focused somewhere in the dark distance of the orchards.

"It's quiet out here. Peaceful." Now I felt painfully stupid. As far as attempts to change the subject go, that was blatantly obvious, but it worked.

He smiled and nodded, the tightness dissolving as he observed the surroundings of our farm fondly. "It is. Mindoir is good for that. Peaceful. Quiet. Easy. A place to forget all your worries."

I was drawn to moments like this with him. He was so closed off and stoic at times that to see him relaxed gave me insight into the kind of person he was. After the childhood he'd had and the years spent working around the Terminus and fringes of Citadel Space he was truly at peace here on this tiny farming colony. It made me wonder about his relationship with my mother. How they both just gave up the lives they were leading to start a family out here. For her it might have been a step down, but for him it was a welcome step towards happiness.

He shrugged the tranquil moment off just as unexpectedly as it had come and headed towards his truck. "I'll be back later. Going to head into town to get some things."

Frowning, I knew he was lying through his teeth. Most of Nouveau Basel was shut down by now. The only places open for business were the restaurants, cafes, and bars. My earlier feelings soured into annoyance for him. I knew he was going to go get drunk so he could forget his latest round of my mother's badgering. I wanted so badly to tell him not to run away from his problems, but the irony of my own cowardly actions stopped me. As the headlights of his truck reversed away from the house down the gravel driveway I stomped off towards the orchards, paying no heed to the lack of light out there as I fumed in silent anger directed at my father and myself.

A few minutes into my walk one of the drones buzzed by, nearly clipping me in the head as it tended to the trees. Muttering under my breath about stupid mechs, I pressed on. Stopping to look back I could make out the outline of the house by the moon and star light. And there, under the lights on the side of the house, was my mother's body. On her stomach and eyes wide open.

Immediately I felt the panic of my memories of that day. The guilt. Why had I left? Stupid. So fucking stupid. Just like my father. Walk away from problems. Coward. If I had stayed, then at the first sign of trouble, all four of us could have piled into mom's skycar and fled... somewhere. Anywhere.

Tears stung at my eyes as I choked back a sob that sounded more like a hiccup. They had stayed waiting for me and Ari. Waiting for us to come home so we could run and hide. And they died because of us. Because of me. I know it. I mean, I didn't know it, but I knew it.

Unable to take the rush of shame and frustration coursing through my body I turned and ran. Ran with everything I had, just like I had ran that day from the batarian pirates. Just like I ran away from all my problems. I kept running, sometimes stumbling over roots. Sometimes being smacked and lashed by errant branches that left bleeding scratches on my face and arms. Eventually I reached the edge of our property and the canal. And just like before, the butt of a rifle swung out and caught me in the chest.

My vision spun and the breath in my chest froze. I landed on my back with a harsh thud and stared at the night sky dotted with stars and a single moon. What was it my father had said? Mindoir was good for this. So peaceful. So quiet. So easy. I think I'd just lay here and never get up.

Suddenly the stars and moon shined brighter and brighter until it was as intense as staring at the sun in the midday sky. I could barely make out the silhouette of the batarian as he stood over me. When he spoke this time, it wasn't in some batarian language. In fact, his voice was oddly familiar.

"Get up! I said get up, recruits! Beauty rest is over! Get. The. Fuck. Up!"

A quick jolt shook me out of my dream and I looked around wildly, finding myself in the barracks. I was in the bottom bunk and I had

drooled onto my pillow. The rest of the platoon was quickly moving to stand in front of their bunks and await instructions from our Drill Instructor, who I now realized was the voice at the end of my dream.

Galen kicked the side of my mattress again and gave me pleading eyes to get up. After the introduction to a 'smoke session' last night I wasn't about to disagree with him. Making Chief Petty Officer Bramante annoyed was a recipe for pain.

I threw off the covers and stumbled out of bed. Standing beside Galen I self consciously used the back of my hand to wipe away any drool that was still on my face as our DI paced around the barracks in his physical training outfit with a large grin.

That made me nervous. Either the man was bipolar or there was something happening this morning that would make him joyful. I feared what could possibly bring a smile to his face.

"The Company Commander said formation would be at zero five hundred in the physical training uniform. It is now zero four forty five. You have ten minutes to get dressed and get outside." As if it were possible his smile became larger, giving him a slightly giddy and deranged look. "Believe me, recruits, when I say you do not want to be late your first day here."

With that he strutted out the door of the barracks and into the chill and darkness of a Reach morning.

I turned and rushed to my locker, grabbing my hygiene bag and then digging through my bags of gear to find the uniform in question. After a few seconds I had found the pieces, which consisted of a gray microfiber shirt with a black UNSC emblem over the right breast, olive green microfiber trunks with the letters UNSC across the right leg, and a set of black all terrain running shoes.

Looking around, I saw that everyone had more or less accepted the fact there would be no privacy, and had been dressing next to their bunks. Figuring it would be a waste of time just to run into the restroom to change out of modesty, I began getting dressed myself.

After finishing I shut my locker and made for the restroom to wash my face and brush my teeth. People had already begun streaming past my bunk with the same idea in mind, leading to even more chaos as people shoved and fought to get time in front of the sinks or empty their bladders in the toilets. One look around and then another at the chronometer on my omnitool told me this was pointless. I turned right back around to ditch my hygiene bag back in my locker and run outside before I was late.

The cold was worse than I had anticipated, but not so bad that I would be freezing to death. However in my own haste and clumsiness I nearly tripped and fell going down the dimly lit stairwell several times.

Upon reaching the ground floor I saw Drill Instructor Bramante staring at his chronometer in boredom. When he noticed me standing there he lowered his arm and gestured to his left, "Go stand over there, recruit. We're going to wait on the rest of your

platoon."

Following his instructions I proceeded to bore myself. I had been the first down, so now all I could do was look around the training facility blanketed in early morning darkness illuminated by the streaks of green and pink from the auroras. My extremities were starting to feel really cold so I rubbed them and shifted around in an attempt to remain warm. Glancing back to DI Bramante, I noticed the man was very muscular. With his exposed arms and legs covered in tattoos and clean shaven head, he looked the part of a rugged military man. Like something you would see in vids.

My examination of him must have garnered his attention. "Quit eyeballing me, recruit. I may be cute, but I'm not interested."

I bit back my own snarky reply of him not really being my type out of self preservation. There's no telling what this man might do to me if he felt sufficiently annoyed.

As if he sensed my fear of reprisal he stalked forward and glared at me, his face in a sneer. "Why is it that you're so far ahead of your fellow platoon mates again, recruit? Think you're better than them? Just going to leave them behind?"

Reeling back in fear and confusion I shook my head in protest, "No. I just--"

"No, what?" His sneer turned into a feral snarl as he invaded my personal space.

Racking my mind for what the hell he could possibly mean by that statement I came to the conclusion he wasn't thrilled I had forgotten his rank and title. Swallowing out of fear I meekly replied "No, Drill Instructor Bramante."

He examined me coolly, bringing up his omnitool and scanning my identitag information. "Recruit Luis Vincent Shepard?" I nodded, desperate to avoid having to verbally respond to him. His frown slowly morphed grin as he asked for clarification. "LVS?"

Again I nodded, confused as to why he was clarifying what my initials were. Was this some sort of test?

His grin grew wider, almost demented, giving me a sinking feeling in my stomach. "Recruit LVS? I like it. You're Elvis from now on. Like that name, recruit?"

My jaw dropped as I wondered how the fuck he came to that conclusion. And no, I didn't like that name. But one look at him showed that while his grin was genuine, the terrifying bipolar nature I'd seen so far was lurking in his eyes. He chuckled at my reaction and walked away, muttering something under his breath and resuming his vigil.

Before I could ponder the significance of what happened, a series of loud footfalls coming down the metal staircase signaled that more of my platoon mates would be here soon. As they trickled down they didn't even bother to say anything nor did Bramante say anything to them. They saw me standing there and moved to join me without being told. Our Drill Instructor continued to stare at his chronometer in

silence, his arms folded.

After another minute or so, and several more recruits, the alarm for his chronometer went off. It was now four fifty five. Or zero four fifty five, whatever.

Swiping at the haptic display of his omnitool to shut it off the man grinned and turned to address those of us down here already. "Time is up, recruits. The high plank position we were in last night? Get into it now."

We all grumbled but complied. I couldn't even begin to fathom why I was being punished. I was here on time, right? It's not my fault the rest were late.

As the rest came down they took one look at us and froze. Drill Instructor Bramante didn't say anything. Just as he did with me he gestured to his left, this time accompanied with a shit eating grin. The belated recruits got the hint and joined us in holding a plank position. Soon the air was filled with the thunderous harmony of a bugle call.

Once we were all accounted for, the Drill Instructor took his time to walk around the platoon. By now most of us were straining, still sore from our injections and the impromptu exercise session yesterday. My own arms were trembling slightly and my face felt exceedingly warm. So much so that I hardly noticed the chill in the air anymore. To add more frustration I still had no idea why myself or the other recruits who showed up on time were being punished.

"When you are told to be somewhere at a given time, you are to be there at that given time, recruits. There is no excuse." Chief Petty Officer Bramante circled us slowly, deliberately taking his time as we labored to keep ourselves from collapsing. His tone was instructional, not at all like his usual barking manner. "You succeed as a group. You fail as a group. One person does not win a war. It is a group effort. We all do our jobs. We are a team. We are a family. It will be in your best interest to remember that. I will not tolerate someone dragging the rest down and I will not tolerate someone leaving everyone else behind. Now on your feet. We have a date to get sweaty with a hot lady."

We stood, shaking and flexing our arms to loosen them from the exertion. Following behind our Drill Instructor I had time to contemplate his words. So I hadn't been punished because of everyone else? I was punished for leaving everyone behind? How did that even make sense? How was it my responsibility to get everyone downstairs on time?

Coming back to the courtyard area I saw that our platoon was the last to arrive. The others looked just as broken and tired as we were as they stood in formation patiently while Captain Cho held her place in front again, all cheery smiles in her physical training uniform. "Glad to see you could make it, Third Platoon. I was beginning to think you overslept."

"Just had to do some on the spot training about unit cohesion and following orders, Ma'am." Drill Instructor Bramante replied smoothly.

Captain Cho smiled brightly and nodded before alluding to her thoughts on his 'on the spot training', "Good deal. It's never too early in the morning to do some training, Chief Petty Officer." She then looked to address the rest of the company with a much louder and harsher voice, "Is it, Echo Company?"

The reply of 'No, Ma'am' was as garbled and off sync as the night before. She clicked her tongue disapprovingly and shook her head, like a mother educating her children. "Well there goes the idea that a good night's rest would solve your enthusiasm problem. Not to worry. We have some high speed, low drag training prepared for you today that should remedy that."

With a loud clap that got the attention of the company, her smile widened. "If there is one thing I enjoy the most about helping turn people into marines, soldiers, airmen and sailors it's physical training." Her face took on a more sinister appearance as she continued although her voice maintained it's absurdly upbeat tone. "So, I take you've all been introduced to the front leaning rest?"

The despair that swept through myself and my fellow recruits was unmistakable.

Her face twisted into something demonic as she roared out at the top of her lungs "Well let's quit stalling and get to it then! High plank position, move!"

Dropping down onto all fours, my arms already were protesting from the abuse they'd seen since I had arrived here. Still, I assumed the position and awaited instructions while idly musing to myself that if my Drill Instructor was bipolar, then my Company Commander might be slightly insane.

* * *

><p>UNSC Training Facility Thirteen, Highland Mountains Military Training Grounds, Vierry Territory, Reach, Epsilon Eridani, Orior Cluster; June 26th, 2572 [Standardized Terran Calendar], 0631 [Local Time, Terran Standard]

Scratch that. There was no slightly. She was insane. And there is no humanly possible way anyone enjoys working out like that, let alone at that time of the morning. By the time we had struggled to finish with a so called refreshing three kilometer run she was even more chirpy than she had been at the start. How does that even happen?

Insane. There was no other way to describe her. She was literally bouncing on her feet in excitement like a child doped up on sugar after we were done. It's like she fueled herself on the pain, tears and sweat of others. Things she must have gorged on this morning.

We had been dismissed and told to wash the failure from our bodies. I couldn't agree more. If failure could be physical, it's definitely what was coating me at the moment. My training uniform was soaked with it. And the damn cold air was starting to turn that failure into freezing and stinky despair. Still, as cold as it was, the thought of crawling the rest of the way was becoming a very real possibility. The fact DI Bramante tailed behind our group dissuaded me from

choosing that option.

The ascent up the stairs was pain staking as the crowd never seemed to move fast enough because each of us labored over every step. Still, the end destination offered one motivating factor. A hot shower. Emphasis on hot. The only thing that would be better was breakfast or whatever had smelled delicious wafting from the building I had passed by yesterday. And then maybe a nap.

Like the rest of the recruits, once inside the barracks I headed to my locker ready to grab my towel and toiletries. This time I wasn't going to skip out. I planned to be the first person in the showers before all the hot water was gone.

"Stand by your bunks, recruits." DI Bramante's command came just loud enough to be heard over the din of lockers and shuffling feet.

Complying with the order, I dropped my towel and hygiene back on my still unmade bunk. Galen let out a frustrated snarl and threw his own towel on his bunk and stood by my side. I frowned as I could smell the drying sweat on him but held back from complaining since I was pretty sure I was just as ripe.

Our Drill Instructor slowly walked down the length of the barracks, observing the bunks and recruits with disgust. Reaching the end he opened a door to the restrooms and poked his head in before turning right back around to face us. Shaking his head he let it be known what he thought of us "You are not home anymore, recruits. These barracks are to be in pristine order. You will make your bunks to military standard. You will not leave the latrine looking like a group of vorchas shit everywhere. You will not be late to another formation."

He opened the door to the restroom and stood by it. "Here's what we are going to do. You are all going to grab your shower items and line up at the door to the latrine. There are ten shower heads and there are fifty of you. I will give you exactly two minutes to wash yourselves before the next group enters. Simple math, all of you should be showered in ten minutes. Now line up."

Well, I sort of figured we'd be showering together but being timed as well? This was ridiculous but what could I do? Grabbing my items I jogged over to the door but was beat by a dark skinned woman. Galen was quick on my heels and managed to wind up right behind me.

We were lead into the restroom and I had to agree with his assessment. I did look like a pack of wild animals had been through here. Stopping near the shower room, DI Bramante activated the chronometer on his omnitool. "First ten recruits, strip down and get ready."

What? Right here? Just like that? There was a moment of hesitation which angered him, "It's not like any of you have something I've never seen before. You're here to wash your filthy sweaty asses, not stare at each other. Now strip. You're on the clock."

To emphasize his point, he activated his omnitool and displayed the haptic countdown, already at one minute and fifty eight seconds.

You know, at this point I should really stop being shocked by whatever this man does or says.

I quickly began divesting myself of my clothes. The other nine recruits were doing the same. The dark skinned woman in front of me began hopping on foot as she tried to remove her shoes only to crash backwards into me. Normally that would have been awkward, seeing as how both of us were partially naked and I had my right hand on her breast as I helped brace her from falling on the floor, but the running countdown of our shower time managed to bypass any feelings of modesty either of us had. She quickly righted herself and continued undressing, while I got smacked in the back of the head by Galen's elbow as he swung his arm down after removing his shirt.

One of the recruits had fully undressed and she rushed past the group of us and entered the showers. Galen was right behind her, but the slick floor caused him to slide right into her and they both fell to the floor in a heap of limbs under the spray of a single shower. DI Bramante snorted at the scene "This isn't time for a romantic show fuck, recruits. Wash up and move out."

Fully naked myself, I grabbed my hygiene bag and removed the shower gel and wash cloth. I took the showerhead farthest from Galen and his 'friend', who were still trying to get up off the floor. Not bothering to pay them any attention I turned on the shower and jumped back as the scalding hot water hit me.

"One minute, recruits." DI Bramante's update annoyed me, coaxing a frustrated growl from my throat. I ran the washcloth through the blistering water streaming out from the showerhead and loaded it with shower gel. Wincing the entire time from the temperature I lathered my body up as quickly as possible, running the rag over my scalp and face haphazardly before moving downwards.

My annoyance grew when his next update came. "Thirty seconds, recruits."

I aggressively scrubbed the rest of myself and finished the job before jumping back in front of the scalding spray. Gritting my teeth and growling through the stinging pain I rinsed myself off to the best of my ability before the water flow ceased. "Time's up. Showers are now off. Move out, recruits."

Freshly clean, scrubbed and possibly burned, I filed out of the showers with the rest. Most had been like me, but a few still had soap suds here and there. I grabbed my gear and moved out of the way for the next ten recruits who had taken the initiative and stripped already. They charged past us as my group stood off to the side toweling ourselves off. I could feel the eyes of the rest of the recruits standing in line staring at us. Chancing a look their way I noticed most of them held looks of fear and shock in their eyes, although a few were being pervs.

"Recruits, when you're finished head out and dress in your Military Combat Uniforms and then standby." I sighed at the order, wondering when we were going to get to eat.

As it turns out, it wouldn't be too long. After the last group had finished showering DI Bramante gave us a quick tutorial on how to make our beds and wear our uniforms according to UNSC standard. He

then gave us the task of making our beds, getting dressed and cleaning the latrine before we would be taken to breakfast at zero seven thirty.

Now the Military Combat Uniform itself was largely annoying to wear. After I was dressed in the uniform I could feel restricted and heavier. Every step was like moving through thick mud. I knew it was partly because of how tired I was but it was still shocking to realize that clothes could feel like this.

As the platoon began to finish with their uniforms and bunks, the resulting chaos erupting over who would do what was starting. We spent more time bickering and whining than getting the actual duties done. Something that I was sure was going to wind up getting us in more trouble. I had the sinking feeling that was his plan.

Eventually we would learn to work as a team or we would continue to be punished. But it seemed all my platoon could focus on was trying to find out who had used things last or made the biggest mess. Those that tried to impose order were shouted down as not having been put in charge. And a minority whined about cleaning being the job of drones.

Not wanting to incur his wrath anymore, the moment my bunk was made to the best of my ability I ignored the rest and grabbed my hygiene bag to finally brush my teeth.

One look at the restroom and I became despondent. Glancing at my omnitool's chronometer, I had a little over fifteen minutes before our deadline. There was no way I could get this done by myself.

I searched the room and wracked my brain as I brushed my teeth, hoping for inspiration on what I could do to make this easier. I could mop the floor and clean the sinks? Maybe?

Frustration set in and I became increasingly annoyed with my platoon. Shouldn't someone else bother to come and help me? Didn't they get it? We were all going to be screwed if this wasn't done.

Brushing my teeth as quickly as I could without slicing my gums or chipping my teeth with my cision pro, I made the plan to go back out there, grab the supplies and get everyone to help me. Once I had finished, I opened the door and yelled out across the barracks as loudly as I could, "Unless you guys want to get in more trouble someone come help me!"

The platoon froze and stared at me like I had lost my mind. The silence reigned as none of them budged from their positions. Frustrated by their reactions, or the lack of any, I moved quickly to toss my hygiene bag on my bed and then grabbed the cleaning supplies from the storage locker near the restroom doors.

When I had finished, no one had made a move to help. Furious beyond words, I swallowed back a roar in my throat as I marched into the restroom holding the cleaning items. Fucking idiots.

I began mopping the floor with angry and reckless strokes. My arms and legs protested from the exertions I'd endured since arriving here plus the added stiffness and weight of my uniform, but I pushed

through it. Nothing but my anger fueled me at this point even though I wanted nothing more than to eat something and go back to bed.

A moment later the door opened and Galen walked in looking sheepish. "Hey. What do you need me to do?"

Frowning, I wondered why he was asking me? I wasn't in charge. This should be common sense. "Just pick something to do."

He looked around helplessly, still standing rooted in the same spot. "I, uh, don't know how to clean anything."

I stopped in my mopping and looked at him incredulously. How do you not know how to clean things?

Just as I was about to sarcastically ask him if he knew how to breathe it occurred to me that he was a duct rat. A homeless charlatan of the Wards. He'd never had a normal life. A home. Parents.

Despite the animosity between us from his antics at the hotel, he had done the right thing that night and helped me with Auggie. And he was here now trying to do the right thing again. He just didn't know how.

Sighing, I continued my mopping and nodded to the cleaners and scrubbing pads on the sink. "Pour some of that stuff on the sink and then use the pad to scrub the sink clean. Use water to rinse it off."

We worked in silence before a few more people walked in. Again, just like Galen, they asked me what needed to be done. Figuring it was easier to assign tasks than have to talk and repeat arguments, I directed them to different sections of the restroom.

We quit with two minutes to spare and although the restroom was hardly spotless, it looked far better than it had before.

At zero seven thirty, DI Bramante marched back into the barracks and directed us to stand by our bunks. Dressed in a fresh uniform, the man looked immaculate. His boots were even polished, which was mind boggling. What was the point of polishing boots if they're meant to get dirty?

One by one he examined our bunks. Those that were unsatisfactory were told to get in the high plank position. By the time he got to Galen and myself, the entire platoon had failed.

One glance at our bunks and he snorted. Not even bothering to address us, he snapped his fingers and then pointed downwards before moving on towards the restrooms.

Dropping to the position, I glanced at Galen and he looked back at me in commiserating frustration. I shrugged my shoulders the best I could in response.

"Unacceptable." Our Drill Instructor had returned from the restroom, shaking his head. He pointed towards the opposite end of the barracks and counted off ten recruits. "Get in there and do the job right this time."

They scrambled to comply with his orders. DI Bramante strolled back in our direction and stood before the two of us. I didn't dare look up but I could feel his eyes on me. After staring at me for several seconds he moved on and I blew a small sigh of relief.

* * *

><p>UNSC Training Facility Thirteen, Highland Mountains Military Training Grounds, Vierry Territory, Reach, Epsilon Eridani, Orior Cluster; June 26th, 2572 [Standardized Terran Calendar], 1345 [Local Time, Terran Standard]

I didn't think it was actually possible to doze off while standing. Apparently I was wrong.

The midday sun and exhaustion were playing havoc on my ability to stay awake. Not that Reach at midday was very warm. It's warmer relative to Reach at night or in the morning. Well, warmish. Enough that every blink seemed to jump time ahead several seconds leaving me light headed and disoriented.

And who could blame me? After we had cleaned the barracks to our Drill Instructor's satisfaction we had been herded to the mess hall to enjoy a nutritious blend of pastes, bars, and shakes. All scientifically proven to provide everything the human body needed when under the severe stress of military training and operations. Unfortunately, it wasn't everything the human stomach needed to avoid being pissed off during military training and operations. Seriously, who thought chocolate latte flavor really tasted like chalk latte? Or vanilla meant devoid of any and all flavor? I made a quick mental note for future reference that picking a military entree based upon the labeled 'flavors' was pointless because nothing tasted like what they were purported to be.

I'd need it because the logic behind these super foods being a staple of military diets was that they were cheap, easy to prepare and stored almost indefinitely in harsh conditions. All huge positives when you considered that most of us would be stationed places where the UNSC would have difficulty providing us with fresh food or even kitchens. Kind of hard to get groceries when you're on a warship patrolling light years away from any populated center or on the ground of a remote world with little to no infrastructure. So we might as well get used to eating the stuff now, right?

Sandwiched between a breakfast and lunch of this bland food had been a two hour block on the introduction to military life. Which mostly consisted of explaining how our gear was to be maintained and stored in our lockers. It was also further education on just how anal DI Bramante could be. At one point the man literally used his omnitool to scan my socks to measure how tightly wound they were.

So after the platoon had failed in that task, again, and suffered the requisite punishments for failure, again, we were rewarded with a lovely sight seeing tour of the training facility. And by tour, I mean education on military commands, marching and formations that just so happened to take us in circles around the facility. I think the dance lessons Mom and later Abuela subjected me to were less ridiculous than the precise movements the UNSC expected from those that wore the uniform.

So now I was trying not to pass out as we stood outside a training facility next to a giant statue of someone named Preston Cole. Made of marble, the statue portrayed an older man in a military dress uniform standing tall and proud with that stereotypical grim thousand meter stare. The name sounded familiar from history lessons but my sleep deprived mind was having trouble connecting the dots.

DI Bramante emerged from the facility wearing full combat armor and spoke through the voice module of his helmet. "Alright, Third. Enter the facility, put on your earpieces and take a seat. Do not touch a thing."

We complied with the order and felt relief at getting off our feet. The building was another of the droll concrete and metal specials here at the training facility but the real difference was the dividing barrier of safety glass which split the room in two. The portion we were in was a dimly lit classroom with seating facing a large holotank and the more strongly lit half. The other side of the barrier had what looked to be a black safety mat for flooring and a solitary inactive mech wearing standard UNSC combat armor.

We watched as he entered the second half through a door and activated his omnitool to link the comms from his helmet to our earpieces, "This block of instruction will be an introduction into the Multi Threat Combatives Program otherwise known as UNSC Martial Arts or UMA."

I don't know how I had missed it, but alongside his right hip was a pistol which he now pulled out and activated. "Your training with weapons and armor systems does not start for another two weeks but familiarization and basic theory are needed to understand why UMA is important." He held the pistol aloft and continued, "First, modern weapons fire small projectiles the size of a small piece of gravel or large grain of sand via electromagnetic mass acceleration."

Holding the pistol with the barrel skywards he gestured with his free hand towards the dummy. "Your basic armor system is attuned to track incoming projectiles moving at speeds which could cause you harm. When it detects one of these projectiles on a trajectory to hit you it creates a small field of increased mass to shield the area of your body expected to be hit. This field robs the projectile of energy and hopefully stops or even deflects it. Observe."

Gripping the pistol with both hands he fired once at the mech and even behind the safety glass two loud cracks were heard. A small blue tinged bolt rocketed forward from the pistol at the mech in the blink of an eye but stopped less than half a meter away as it hit a dark blue field of energy that rippled with gold sparks and shook the mech slightly from the impact.

DI Bramante deactivated the pistol and then stomped his way toward the mech. Once within range he lunged forward while swinging the pistol in a violent downward arc. The pistol whip motion crashed against the helmet clad head of the mech and it toppled over sideways. He removed his helmet and placed the pistol along side his hip where it magnetically clamped into place. Standing victoriously over his vanquished 'foe' he turned and inserted his own earpiece and addressed us. "As you can see the protective field did not stop my melee strike. That is because these systems are meant to be so simple

that they are fool proof under intense environmental and combat conditions."

With a tap of his omnitool a holotank in the center of the classroom sprang to life, displaying a chest plate similar to the one DI Bramante and the mech wore. Small sensors in the armor were highlighted and zoomed in on as he continued his instruction, "A mass accelerated projectile moves fast enough that at close ranges even a VI can not categorize and react to threats quick enough. So the system is designed to respond to threats moving in excess of seven hundred meters per second. If it tried to react to all threats the system would be activating constantly for trivial matters and insignificant things and that would not be beneficial. It would drain the power supply and make your job a whole lot more difficult. And that, recruits, is where this program comes into play."

"Melee strikes with your body or hand held weapons exploit a necessary weakness with kinetic barriers but there is a secondary foe." Quickly rapping his knuckles on the chest plate to emphasize his point, he continued, "This armor system is the last line of defense. It protects the wearer from the majority of impact once the kinetic barrier does it's job robbing a projectile of kinetic energy. But should your kinetic barrier fail the armor is built to withstand several direct hits from mass accelerated projectiles at full strength without allowing penetration. Your hardest punch or kick will not do much to break it."

DI Bramante walked back into the classroom and stared us down silently for a moment. "But that does not mean that direct hits from a mass accelerated projectile at full strength do not hurt. They do. A lot. Only that the armor will protect you from penetration. So if you can't break the armor, then you will break the person inside of it. If you can't break their nose or knock out their teeth, then snap their neck. If you can't break their ribs, then twist their arm out of their socket. If you can't snap their leg, then shatter their fucking knee." The venom and anger in his voice rose with each explanation, glaring at us as if he wanted to do just that to each and every one of us. "Now you understand the purpose of this program. Combat is fast and brutal and won by the person most willing to inflict harm on their opponent."

Turning to face the holotank, he activated his omnitool and life sized images of various races appeared. Most of them I recognized. Then there were the ones that were a bit more obscure. The Covenant races I assumed.

"Our race has had thousands of years and plenty of reasons to develop ways to slap the taste out of each others mouth and we've used it well. There are dozens of martial arts forms native to our people and the UNSC has taken the best of these concepts and training to incorporate into the program. But your fellow humans are not the only threat you'll face in your career." His glare intensified with each image, like he was reliving lingering memories about how each race had offended him in some way. "It can not be stressed enough, recruits, that xenos are not humans. It might make you feel all tingly inside to hold hands and treat everyone like equals, but in combat that's a quick way to get yourself and your fellow UNSC personnel killed. Each species has a different physiology that requires you fight them a certain way. Strengths to watch out for. Weaknesses to exploit."

He glanced back at us and asked, "Any questions so far, recruits?"

There was an uneasy silence as most of the platoon was probably like myself. Too afraid to draw attention or ask a question that might end up triggering some form of punishment. Or so I thought.

A recruited seated a dozen or so spaces away from me raised his hand to speak. Drill Instructor Bramante raised an incredulous eyebrow until the recruit realized we had just been taught to stand to be recognized this morning. He quickly, and sheepishly, stood and addressed our instructor. "We're going to be taught to fight all species, Drill Instructor?"

Bramante snorted and waved the recruit off, who quickly sat down. "Your training is not going to be complete during UCMT. It will be a career long process. Every unit is required to provide training for appropriate levels. Some of you might be required to show higher levels of proficiency to obtain and maintain your MVC qualifications."

I gulped at that tidbit of information. Chances are light infantry probably required you to be able to wrestle a krogan into submission.

My internal musing must have been transmitted to our instructor's mind, because he punched a few commands into his omnitool and three life sized images locked into place.

A krogan, a sangheili and a jiralhanae. Each monstrosity was a mass of muscle and fury that dwarfed any human.

DI Bramante stared at the holodisplay with pure hatred, "We'll teach you how to fight them, recruit. But let me save you some time and effort. If you ever find yourself backed into a corner with no other option but to get into a fist fight with one of these bastards..." He trailed off and shook his head, looking back at the recruit who had asked the question and replying blandly, "Well, good fucking luck. Make peace with whatever god you believe in and at least try and take the son of a bitch with you."

Now if that didn't hammer home the reality of what we were here to train for, then nothing would. I briefly had a flashback to the asari and batarians on Mindoir. Just how lucky had Ari and I been? By all means they should have shredded us to pieces. And now? I was going to be trained to fight against something like this? Next to these things, Pavlo seemed like a runt and I had only gotten by with that because I used my biotics.

"On your feet. We got about two or three more hours to get you acquainted with the basics of slapping the shit out of someone. Pair up and head inside the room."

I stood and looked around, trying to gauge who would not kill me. Galen caught my eye and shrugged. We filed in with the rest of the platoon and stood side by side awaiting further instructions. In the interim I tried to assess his potential but realized I really knew nothing about this subject. He was a bit shorter than me, but looked sturdy. Scrappy. Wiry. Probably fought frequently as a duct rat,

which made me want to facepalm at my brilliant idea to pair up with him.

"Alright, first technique is the most common and basic. A lot of times you're going to be in close quarters. Ships, stations, facilities, buildings, they're not exactly the roomiest. You're armed with your weapon and someone ambushes you by grappling. You want to get out of grappling range and knock your opponent off balance, possibly to the floor, so you can use your weapon." He walked us through a demonstration on the holodisplay of two figures in close range grappling when one knocks the other off balance to the floor before giving us our orders. "You and your partner engage in a clinch like the demonstration shows and begin working on knocking each other down. Proceed."

Galen and I looked at each other apprehensively and awkwardly followed instructions. After a minute or two of futile wrestling, it was obvious neither of us seemed to have the strength or skill to perform the maneuver, but a quick glance around showed that no one else did either. A moment later I regretted my need to observe my surroundings as Galen used my distraction to sneak his right leg behind both of mine and tripped me as the demonstration had shown.

I slammed down on the mat hard. Dazed and sleepy, I contemplated just giving up and resting here for a moment. Time must have been going faster than I had thought, because in an instant DI Bramante was hovering over me. He scanned me with his omnitool and when it was finished his face contorted into a less than pleased snarl. "Well, you just going to lay there and take a nap, recruit? Or are you going to get up and make him pay for what he did?"

Well, to be perfectly honest, the first option sounded better. But I don't think it would have turned out like I hoped, so I took a deep breath and stood. Dusting myself off, I looked at Galen who was nervous at having the Drill Instructor so near. I glanced back at Bramante and he leaned in, grabbing me by the collar of my uniform and causing me to flinch, "If he knocks you down again, I am going to make you wish you were never born, Recruit Elvis."

At my fearful nod he released me and backed away. I gave a nervous glance his way and tried to fired myself up to avoid failing. Lunging at Galen, I took him by surprise and nearly had him, until he corrected his positioning. Using my over leveraged grasp he managed to lower his body and topple me over easily.

Falling down face first into the mat, I growled and punched it in frustration. I didn't even need to roll over to look and see that I was in trouble. And we still had two or three more hours to go. Lucky. Fucking. Me.

* * *

><p>UNSC Training Facility Thirteen, Highland Mountains Military Training Grounds, Vierry Territory, Reach, Epsilon Eridani, Orior Cluster; June 22nd, 2572 [Standardized Terran Calendar], 1832 [Local Time, Terran Standard]

I stood outside the mess hall exhausted and sore beyond belief awaiting even more training, this time by myself. We had wrapped up our first UMA session and gone back to marching and formation drills,

which was infinitely more fun with all the neat sprains and bruises we were sporting, followed by yet another meal of not actually food.

Drill Instructor Bramante hadn't been playing when he said he would make me regret being born. It seemed like every time we had a moment to pause or wait, he had me do so by performing some exercise. Granted, I wasn't alone. There were several others who managed to displease him during the hand to hand training, but he seemed to have a fascination with me.

Galen had tried apologizing to me but I had shrugged him off. It wasn't really his fault. I just sucked at fighting.

And now I was going to have an additional session of training with First Sergeant Yilmaz. Joy.

At first I had figured this was an extension of my punishment but it turns out it was worse than that. I was the only biotic in my platoon, and every evening I was going to be joining the other biotics in the company so that we could receive additional instruction from a qualified instructor.

Eventually I was joined by a girl named Moy and a guy named Walma. So three total out of two hundred. I knew biotics were rare, but this was shocking. Or, at least, it would have been shocking if I had the energy to focus enough to be shocked. Maybe mildly shocked. Mocked? Yeah, that works. I was being mocked.

We stood in silence for another ten minutes allowing my mind to drift while I stared out across the field. It was about this time yesterday that I had arrived and after a full day I could safely say I would never voluntarily visit. I'm sure the rest of Reach was an absolutely lovely place but after this my memories would be forever tainted by cold and bitterness.

First Sergeant Yilmaz came strolling our direction carrying a small case under his left arm. He stared at the three of us before quickly giving us commands to march towards the sand pits near our company building.

When we reached them he had us spread out in a line while he opened the case. He produced three small orbs and placed them in the sand about ten meters away from each of us. "I am going to assume each of you can at least create a mass reduction field. I want you to make these drones float at about hip height and hold them there for five seconds."

I nodded to myself. That was simple enough, even in my weakened state I could easily do that. I focused and drew a breath in through my nose as I stared at the orb. Reaching out with my right hand, palm facing upward I slowly curled my fingers. The hum of a static electricity tingle surged through my body as a dark blue corona of energy engulfed me. The drone rose quickly and exceeded the desired height so I drew back on the field a bit, causing the drone to sink back to hip height.

Idly I noticed the hum of energy in the air as the other two did the same but I had learned my lesson well earlier today. No distractions.

Just as I was starting to feel the strain, First Sergeant Yilmaz directed us to release the fields. I did so gladly, shaking my arms and rolling my neck as the residual tingles remained in my body.

Examining each of us he nodded and then walked back to the drones. One by one he picked them up and used his omnitool to activate them, where they were covered in a soft bluish glow and hovered in air. "Your training for tonight is to try and hit the drone with a mass reduction field."

I frowned. Wasn't that what we just did? What more did he need to see or teach us?

Once out of the line of fire, he pressed a command into his omnitool and the drones began zipping around erratically.

Oh. Moving targets. Fuck my life.

Yet again I blocked out everything as I focused and drew a deep breath through my nose. My eyes tracked the drone flying and I began estimating the distance and placement of my field. Just as I was raising my hand to unleash my biotics, a booming voice thundered from behind us. "You going to wait for an invitation, recruits?"

I jumped to the side in fright, my concentration lost. The other recruits did the same. First Sergeant Yilmaz chuckled darkly as he strolled behind us. We all craned our heads to track his movements. His pace was leisurely, with his hands behind his back. Once at the far end he turned back to explain his actions. "Successful use of biotics in combat relies upon being able to focus on your surroundings while summoning your gifts. The enemy is not going to wait so you can concentrate and go through all the nifty exercises you were taught. They won't hold still so you can measure and aim your attacks. They won't stop attacking so you can stand out in the open. And you're going to need to be able to accurately call on your gifts when you're scared, stressed, tired, bleeding, in pain, and lives are on the line."

His face took on the dark and brooding look that he normally wore, "You're going to have to learn how to quickly use your biotics under duress. The simplest method is through repetition under less than favorable conditions. This is your first full day on Reach so the three of you are dog tired from the shock of the training regimen and lack of adjustment to local time. Perfect conditions to simulate being on another planet and having fought all day. So tonight you will focus on hitting that moving drone with as many mass reduction fields as you can while I try my best to break your concentration."

We stared at him in utter disbelief. He couldn't be serious. I'd be lucky to hit it once under those conditions.

His glare and growled command said otherwise. "You're wasting time staring at me. Proceed, recruits."

I turned to focus on the drone and went through my exercises quickly, trying to block out the talking and sudden loud noises. I raised my arm and quickly flexed my fingers, but to no avail. Not even a slight

tingle.

Frustrated I did it again. I blocked out my irritation and ran through my exercise quietly but quickly and managed a weak field that completely missed the drone. I could swear that it zoomed right back to the place I had been aiming at like it was teasing me.

"Oh, gotta be faster than that, recruit."

I mumbled under my breath about assholes that never shut up and tried again. Another miss.

We kept going as the sun slowly started to set but the bluish glow of the drones and the facility lighting was enough to go by. I tried over and over but could never quite hit the damn thing. My exhaustion forgotten I was being driven by pure rage towards the end. I'm not sure how long we were out there, but I was drenched in sweat and panting but I had managed to completely block everything out. Now I just didn't seem to have the timing or energy to successfully nail the little ball of circuits.

"Hold your fire, recruits." First Sergeant Yilmaz's command pierced through my fury and I slowly calmed down. Nothing was going right. As he deactivated the drones I leaned forward with my hands on my knees as the dizziness and headrush from using my biotics so intensely in a short period of time caught up to me. I stared at the sand below me, sweat trickling down my brow and nose, stinging my eyes and coating my lips where it tasted bitter and salty. I drew in deep breaths to calm my pounding heart and ease the nausea I was feeling, all the while my self loathing and disappointment set in.

Why couldn't I do anything right? Was I destined to be a fuck up at this too?

I vaguely recalled my idiotic plans for joining. Take time to figure out what I wanted to do with my life. See the galaxy. I snorted in derision as I blinked back tears. What a fucking idiot.

Once he had collected the drones, Yilmaz scanned us for neural problems and produced three energy bars. "Eat up. You just burned through a lot of calories. I don't want you passing out tomorrow morning during PT."

Unwrapping the bar, I tore a chunk off and popped it into my mouth. It tasted disgusting, but my stomach was starting to rumble and I just wanted this day to end. Chewing quickly I demolished the rest of the bar in two more pieces, stuffing the wrapper into the pocket of my MCU trousers.

He organized us into a small file and we jogged back to the company building. Before he dismissed us he paused, reaching into his collar and removing his dog tags from around his neck in order to pass on one last word of advice, "Let me see your dog tags." We pulled out our own to his approval. He handled one of his tags and touched it against the metal frame of the door leading to the offices for the company staff. "You can use your dog tags to discharge your static charge. I don't want to hear about you hurting yourself or someone else because you forgot."

Upon being dismissed I trudged my way around the building and looked

out across the darkened field and black wood line lit with the periodic green and pink hues of the aurora in the sky. Up in the night sky the twin moons of Reach shined, one larger than the other. Beyond that the stars of the galaxy twinkled brightly behind colorful light show. Even as tired as I was I brought out my omnitool and activated the star map function so I could get a better idea of what I was looking at.

Keying in Malawi I was rewarded with the location of my home star system in the night sky, even it if was far too faint to be seen with just my eyes alone. I stared up in it's direction and sighed.

What had I been thinking joining the UNSC? I wasn't cut out for this shit.

Breaking through my negative thoughts I continued my labored journey up the stairs as the full toll of my biotic training session began to take effect. I was barely able to shuffle and drag my feet forward to the doors of the barracks.

Shower. Shower and sleep. That's all I wanted. I could put up with anything else they wanted to throw at me so long as I got those.

Just as I was about to activate the door mechanism I paused, remembering the First Sergeant's advice. Pulling out my dog tags I ran them across the metal railing of the staircase to release the excess static charge I had built up with a quick snap and sizzle.

Exhausted but inordinately pleased with myself for finally getting something right today I smiled and proceeded to swipe my hand over the haptic door lock.

What I was greeted with wiped that smile right off my face and nearly caused me to drop my dog tags.

My eyes blinked rapidly from the the bright lights of the barracks as I took in the sight of my entire platoon on their backs doing crunches while DI Bramante paced the length of the room. Everyone froze upon seeing me, and I realized how pathetic I must look. Worn out, covered in sweat, and with a look of dismayed shock on my face.

Bramante was the first to snap out of his stupor and greeted me with an evil smile, "Recruit Elvis! Right on time, shitbrick. Come on in and shut the door. We're just getting in a little bit of ab work before the night is through."

* * *

><p>Codex Entry: Reach

The human colony of Reach is the primary military and industrial hub for the Systems Alliance and the fourth largest by population with roughly seven hundred million. Located within the Epsilon Eridani system of the Orior Cluster, close proximity to the human homeworld of Earth has helped create the robust defense, aerospace, and resource extraction industries that make it the most important colony of the human race.

For a young planet, at less than one billion [Terran] years, Reach is remarkably geologically stable and possesses an extensive biodiversity in native ecosystems. Humans have found it to have comparable attributes to Earth, such as a day length of [Terran Translation: 27 Terran hours], orbital period of [Terran Translation: 438.75 Terran days; 390 Local days], gravitational pull of [Terran Translation: 1.08 g], and an average surface temperature of [Terran Translation: 8 degrees Celsius]. Topography is dominated by large oceans surrounding four continents, eight large islands, and year round ice sheets at both poles. A strong magnetic field protect the planet from it's proximity to Epsilon Eridani, which also helps create frequent and powerful aurora phenomena. It possesses two natural satellites, Csodazarvas and Turul, creating strong tidal cycles. A series of meteor impact craters dating back to over two hundred million [Terran] years ago dot the surface of the planet forming large seas and natural bays.

The planets of Epsilon Eridani were well known to human astronomers prior to the discovery of slipspace and mass effect physics, making the system a top candidate for the first round of interstellar exploration in 2296 [Terran Standard Calendar] led by human icon Admiral Jon Grissom. What he and his crew found was a habitable planet with comparable characteristics to Earth that required minimal terraforming in addition to extensive sources of titanium, aluminum, selenium, and bauxite found throughout the system. The real surprise was the discovery of the large extrasolar capture asteroid Vadleany in the outer dust cloud that contained a significant amount of Element Zero. After the first wave of expeditions and surveys were concluded the UEG placed Epsilon Eridani at the top of the list for the first ever human interstellar colonization effort as the resources of the system would expedite future human colonial efforts

By 2309 [Terran Standard Calendar] the UEG had authorized the first wave of development in the system starting with early terraforming and colonial planning teams being sent to Reach. Meanwhile resource extraction in the system began in earnest as it was opened to private industry. The third segment of this first wave was the development of orbital infrastructure above Reach in order to facilitate the creation of shipyards to produce the next generation vessels for the UNSC and commercial interstellar shipping. Additionally a great deal of the material mined and refined was shipped to the Arcturus system to aid in the construction of Arcturus Station which was being build concurrently to the colonization of Reach. By 2362 [Terran Standard Calendar] the terraforming and construction of infrastructure for Reach had concluded and opened the door for the second wave of colonists, most of which came from the eastern provinces of the European Union.

The comparable conditions of Reach made it a natural fit for those permanent settlers. Unfortunately, human colonization has proven to be taxing and threatening to native lifeforms. The terraforming project created a drastic change that much of the natural biodiversity of the planet struggled to adapt to in such a short period. Colonists also introduced many species native to Earth for food and landscaping creating some invasive populations.

The Federation of Reach Territories is the recognized national government for the planet, overseeing six territories. New

Alexandria, located in the Viery Territory, is the capital of the nation and colony as well as being one of the largest cities in all of Systems Alliance Space. Because of the resource extraction, military hub, and major shipyards on the surface and in orbit, the Epsilon Eridani system has one of the most active SSEE [Slipstream Exit Entry Point] transfer rates in Systems Alliance space, keeping pace with the Arcuturs and Sol SSEE transfer rates. The primary economy is still driven by space vessel construction and repair or resource extraction operations, most of which are conducted on the moons of the gas giant Fene. The mature population centers on the colony have typical service and financial industries, but a large portion of the population still lives in smaller and remote farming, mining, and livestock communities.

Often referred to as the unofficial home of the UNSC, Reach and the entire Epsilon Eridani system has a significant military presence. Today the colony boasts the largest concentration of human military forces outside of the Sol system. Many former military personnel settle down on Reach after leaving service and put their experience to work in the local defense industries. Because of this the colony enjoys a mutually beneficial relationship with the UNSC as the veterans and active duty military personnel contribute greatly to the economy. An orbital defense grid consisting of twenty four orbital defense platforms and two hundred planetary defense cannons protect the planet.

The age of the colony and increased military presence contribute to make politics on Reach more aligned with Earth, giving way to the prevailing inner colony versus outer colony mentality of human political activity. During both Insurrection Wars Reach managed to avoid any large scale insurrections, but did not come away unscathed with notable instances such as the bombing of the luxury space liner National Holiday in orbit. As of late, insurrectionist activity in system has been on the rise from historical levels. This is speculated to be attributed to Harvest refugees disgruntled with the Systems Alliance. Many of these refugees have settled down in the remote communities.

The future of the system looks to be set as experts believe the colony of Reach, barring unexpected events or technological breakthroughs, has neared the extent of it's potential for growth. Currently the largest project is the continued work towards reconstituting military units and vehicles lost during the Harvest Campaign for assignment to either the Maroon Sea or Artemis Tau clusters.

* * *

><p>Codex Entry: Combatives

Most known species of sapients have developed specialized systems of unarmed and armed melee combat. These systems are typically based around schools of thought regarding how best to approach conflict and defense objectives. Due to reasons pertaining to social structure and organization some species develop complex systems with multiple permutations while others do not.

Practitioners use all available movement, limbs, and weapons to strike, grapple, lock, and incapacitate single or multiple opponents. There is a prevailing tendency to base forms around postures and

movements that mimic native life forms or natural phenomena. These forms make great use of species specific physiological traits to maximize efficiency in delivering quick and powerful attacks, evading incoming blows or holds, and minimizing exertion. Weapons training is often incorporated into these combat systems as education in their use and defense against a wielding opponent. A majority of schools combine physical training regimens, philosophy education, theological instruction, and self mastery with combat education to encompass a full spectrum of growth in pupils and raise combat preparedness.

Most systems were solidified into their present configuration prior to their interstellar phase of development. Over generations these codified systems have gained an extensive understanding of the physiology of the species in order to best combat their own kind. This has proven to be difficult to transfer into melee combat with other species despite the prevailing physiological similarities in sapient beings. Small differences such as mass, body composition, joint structure, flexibility, speed, and strength make a large portion of the teachings and abilities of the codified forms unsuitable and ineffective against xeno opponents.

This revelation leads to an overhaul that incorporate tactics and understanding from all systems that would best utilize species capabilities in effectively combating xeno opponents. Since most species are highly organized and unified in reaching the interstellar phase of development, the revised and unified system is disseminated as a single combat system, or combatives, for the entire race and typically taught to military, law enforcement, and security personnel. The concepts of the system are typically taught with multiple variations for the same attacks and counters that are to be employed when facing opponents of different species.

A unique facet of this interstellar phase of development for combatives is the incorporation of biotic phenomena. The population of biotics for a given species is generally small due to the low levels of exposure and effects of element zero toxicity. This has lead to the asari, as the only naturally occurring biotic race, to be the masters at incorporating biotics into combatives. A further obstacle is the social perception of biotics in races outside of the asari, which prevents dedicated study into maximizing non asari biotic potential in combat. Biotics of other races are instead forced to adapt asari specific practices to their own racial combatives, often with substandard results in comparison to their asari peers.

Mass effect technology has also shaped the teaching and usage of combatives in the interstellar phase. Close quarters combat exploits the theory and use of light and resilient materials in personal armor defense systems and kinetic barrier shielding. Most competent military educations teach students on how to properly exploit these weaknesses and more importantly how to avoid an opponent attempting to do the same.

* * *

><p>Codex Entry: Personal Armor Defense Systems

A premium is placed on comprehensive defenses and dynamic services for a galactic civilization that stretches across the stars. Whether

its the labors and difficulties of traversing vacuum and extreme terrain across the galaxy or the efficiency and lethality of modern combat, this need is fulfilled by personal armor defense systems, or PADS. Manufacturers create competitive designs and proprietary technology for these armors in order to provide a large assortment of baseline models and modular packages to configure an individual PADS to any needs or budget.

After the Krogan Rebellion the Citadel Council instituted a rating scheme for PADS and made it law that all civilian models sold to the public be verified for quality and capability accordingly. This rating scheme has proven to be so well received that it has become the standard for rating military grade PADS and PADS created and sold outside of Citadel Space. It bases scores and classifications on: Racial specialization; Weight class of the armor; Vacuum seal rating; Armor strength; Kinetic barrier shielding class; Physical enhancement; Sensory enhancement; Communications suites; And electronic defense suites. A secondary set of scores pertain to environmental ratings against: Atmospheric pressure; Biological hazards; Chemical corrosion; Nanite susceptibility; Radiological shielding; And extreme temperature tolerance.

Terrestrial PADS, or Planetside, designs are the simplest and most common form found. Built for rapid wear and removal with minimal options these armor suites provide basic passive enhancement, active defenses, and no environmental protection limiting their use to hospitable environments. This series of armor is the most economical and sensible option for private workforces, law enforcement, private security, and military forces on light planetside duty.

Atmospheric/Exoatmospheric PADS, or A/X and VacSuit, are meant for vacuum or extremely hostile environment operations. This series of armor suites are common among military forces and civilian professions in orbit or uninhabitable terrain. They provide basic passive enhancement, active defenses, and a high rating of environmental protection. The price of these more robust defenses makes the armor a necessary but cost prohibitive part of work beyond the safety of habitable planets.

Power Armors PADS are somewhat of a misnomer as all PADS are powered and enhance the user in many ways. What distinguishes these armor suites is their active enhancement to facilitate increased motive power and allow the armor to be more heavily equipped. Because of this Power Armor PADS also provide some of the highest levels of active defenses and environmental protection. What prevents their widespread use is the high cost of production, poor return on that investment over other vehicles and systems, and limitations on the extent to which wearers can be enhanced.

All PADS are formed around advanced VI and sensor suites built into layers of gear and armor that provide the wearer with insulation, protection, and support. These layers are made to passively and actively interact with the wearer, VI systems and each other to maximize mobility and extend function while providing excellent protection.

An undersuit worn directly over the flesh is the base layer to all PADS. It serves to regulate the basic environmental needs of a wearer, provide information on the health and status of the wearer

for personal or networked observation, and enhance the capabilities of the wearer. In PADS that use passive enhancement it achieves this by providing support for the structure of the body to minimize the strain of movement and impact. In Power Armor PADS that use active enhancement this layer is thicker and helps to both provide greater enhancement and protect the wearer from the stress of that enhancement.

The intermediate layer varies by design, but most models are made of light weight and durable textiles that are resistant to punctures and tears. Further reinforcing these textiles are interwoven layers of ceramics and polymers to provide insulation against the environment and some ballistic and kinetic impact protection. Law enforcement, military, or workplace uniforms are typically made to have dual purpose as stand alone uniforms or serve as this layer in Terrestrial models. Atmospheric/Exoatmospheric and Power Armor models are thicker sealed environmental uniforms or 'skins'. These vacuum rated uniforms are thicker to accommodate greater reinforcement to ensure environmental integrity as well as a greater prevalence of internal and integral sensory and feedback systems controlled by dedicated VIs.

The iconic armor plating is the outer layer of a PADS system, otherwise known as the hard suit. Aside from obvious physical protection they provide, the armor plates houses a majority of the subsystems for the suit. PADS armor consists of a reinforced helm and rigid plates that interlock to cover the body while still not infringing upon mobility and flexibility. Heavier and more sophisticated PADS, particularly Power Armors, feature actuated joints and a light exoskeleton. A power cell housing located on the back is the standard source of power for the entire PADS, but more exotic and expensive options exist. The light weight plates are capable of withstanding and absorbing high energy kinetic impacts and extreme temperatures with minimal damage. Housed within the plating are an array of sophisticated sensors to aid the wearer in detection, navigation, and medical monitoring. A kinetic barrier generation system provides primary active reflexive defense.

Designs for the plating, intermediate layer, undersuit, and subsystems vary wildly between races and manufacturers, and even then personal touches like paint jobs, decals, and customization are part of the PADS experience. The armor itself is typically modular, with the ability to exchange parts with those from a different or newer PADS model provided the manufacturer is the same or the armor is built on a universal design.

The modular nature of PADS allows for additional options offered by manufacturers as either standard with delivery or after market customization and refurbishing kits. Common option systems include redundant kinetic barriers, active camouflage, specialized VI and database suites, thruster packs, medical attention suites, tactical packages, electronic warfare suites, and advanced fabrication suites.

10. Reaching A Turning Point

****AN:** Sorry if this chapter glosses over his time in UCMT. I still have his MVC light infantry training left to cover and I really wanted to avoid spending too much time on his training. The primary

objective is to show the adversity Shepard is facing in adapting to a military mindset and pushing his own limits.**

You should start seeing some of the qualities and abilities he'll possess in the future. You'll also see that his progression towards becoming Commander Shepard is a process that took a lot of hard work and help over the course of several years.

So just bear that in mind. He's still currently an 18 year old kid that never expected to leave his outer colony world.

**Also, as an aside, if anyone knows a good beta available for work, or is interested in the job themselves, I would love to hear about it in a PM. Editing my own work is time consuming and ineffective because I keep seeing the chapters as a blur of words and paragraphs that I know because I wrote them. **

Edit: Apologies. I seem to have accidentally uploaded a version missing page breaks between scenes and a few other errors.

* * *

><p>UNSC Training Facility Thirteen, Highland Mountains Military Training Grounds, Vierry Territory, Reach, Epsilon Eridani, Orior Cluster; July 18th, 2572 [Standardized Terran Calendar], 0637 [Local Time, Terran Standard]

"C'mon Shep!"

"Third Squad represent!"

"Suck it up, Elvis!"

Ignoring the catcalls coming from my squad was the easy part. Maintaining my grip on the bar was where I had difficulties. After eighteen pullups my entire upper body was beseeching me to stop and let go. And I really wanted to but another part of my anatomy was reminding me that wouldn't be a good idea.

I liked to refer to it as DI Bramante's boot up my ass.

"If you don't knock out two more you're going to crank out twenty push ups, Recruit Elvis."

His usual method of motivation, which consisted of threats and insults, was starting to wear thin. I swallowed back and gritted my teeth, fighting to lift myself from the dead hang.

"You can stop wriggling around anytime now, recruit."

I wanted nothing more than to wriggle a bit more forcefully and kick out a leg. Accidentally, of course.

Shelving that scenario for daydreaming at a later date, I channeled my anger and frustration into lifting myself past the plane where my shoulders were above my elbows. A growl rolled out from deep in my throat as my face became uncomfortably hot even with the typical morning temperature.

"Bravo series don't quit!"

The growl in my throat turned into an awkward hiccup as I swallowed back on bark of laughter. I'd grown to be friendly with Galen in the short amount of time spent as bunk and squad mates. Sharing stories about our pasts, working together, and looking out for each other made me realize he was probably the closest thing I had to a friend here.

I let that odd and depressing thought sink in.

Along the way I had learned the one thing we had in common was our MVC designation. Bravo series light infantry. I was going Marines, he was going Army, but we both would continue our training together on Earth. If you would have told me that when we were boarding our transports for Reach I would have figured it was more of my bad luck, but now I was looking forward to having a familiar face on this wild journey.

Problem was he had a competitive streak a light year wide. He had also taken it upon himself to not so subtly goad me into competing with him over just about anything. And when that wasn't enough? He would take our combined performances as source of pride and challenge to all the rest of the squad or platoon.

When my chin finally cleared the bar I blew out a heavy breath of relief and lowered myself, taking a slight break. The entire effort made me feel like I was lifting twice my weight. Which was ridiculous. I know I'd put on some muscle in the past few weeks, but not enough to account for the way I was feeling.

"Nineteen."

The platoon cheered and my squad roared in harmony of to the side as they had finished their evaluations, "Third Squad! Too Strong!"

Ever the joyful bearer of bad news, DI Bramante brought my pride back down to Reach with reality. "One down, one to go. Get to it or quit wasting our time, Recruit Elvis."

Glaring at the ground below me my mind cycled through every expletive I wanted to yell at him. Once again I let anger and frustration fuel me. Bellowing an inarticulate yell of frustration and rage, I flexed my arms, back and chest one last time to pull myself upwards against the constant tug of gravity until my chin cleared the bar.

"Twenty."

I released my grip on the bar and landed back on my feet while continuing that vocalization as a primal bark, equal parts thrilled to be finished and riled up at being provoked. The urge to continue acting like a prideful animal carried into an exaggerated display of swinging my arms and flexing my back to release the strain. I might have also lost my mind temporarily. Between the anger, adrenaline and pristine Highland Mountains morning air running through my veins I brazenly stared down my DI the entire time.

I was far from the best in the platoon, but I wasn't the worst either. I didn't seem to matter what I did, it wasn't enough. Of course he pushed everyone, but seemed to reserve an extra bit of

saltiness for me. Additional snark and nastiness with my name on it. I don't know what I had done to warrant it, but I knew it was beginning to grate on my nerves.

He stared back unfazed, a slight grin on his face. Breaking eye contact deliberately to enter my total into his datapad, he was dismissive, almost mocking, of me. "Not bad, Elvis. You might have found your spine this morning." He glimpsed back up ever so slightly, still wearing that infuriating smirk, to remind me just who was in charge with a chilling taunt. "That just means I have something to snap if you ever eyeball me like that again."

In that face of his cold rebuke my animal instincts resumed, this time making me feel like I had potentially provoked a superior, and bipolar, predator. Instantly weighing my odds, I scampered back to my place in the formation before he decided to prove his spine snapping abilities.

Resuming the relaxed posture of standing in formation my shoulders and back persisted in feeling sore. I tried flexing in different directions to stretch them a bit more. So lost in trying to find a position that soothed my aching body that I didn't catch Galen leaning over and slugging me in a shoulder.

My head snapped in his direction as the impulse to retaliate consumed me but the goofball ignored my fury with a shit eating grin. I felt my aggravation melt away, reciprocating with a half grin of my own. He wagged his eyebrows comically and I chuckled, shaking my head at his antics. Nothing could ruin his infectious mood. It was impossible to be in his presence and not feel upbeat after a while.

That is until a whispered russian accented voice from the opposite direction dryly commented on our behavior, "I swear the two of you have the most painful way of flirting with each other."

Galen leaned forward to look past me and glare at Anna, one of our squad mates. She was unperturbed and gazed back with a raised eyebrow.

I shrugged nonchalantly to destroy her joy, "You look pleased with yourself."

She sighed and reflexively reached up to play with a lock of her hair. Her frown became pronounced when her fingers found nothing but the short fuzz on her scalp. Crossing her eyes and snarling, she dropped her hand and blew out another harsh breath. "I can't wait until I can grow my hair back."

Seizing on the chink in her armor I quickly reached out to rub her scalp roughly, "Awww. It's not bad looking. I'm sure someone blind and desperate will flirt with you just the way you are."

Galen bit back on a bark of laughter so as not to draw attention to us.

Leaning out of my reach she turned her glare on me with a slight flush to her face that was due to more than her physical exertion this morning. "Shut up, Elvis."

Smiling charmingly I punched her lightly in the shoulder to show her

there was no hard feelings. She rolled her green eyes and chuckled before glancing at Galen who looked like he wanted to give her a punch of his own. Her good humor evaporated as she raised her fist threateningly at him, "Don't even think about, C-Urchin."

Galen's face soured at the moniker he had been saddled with. C-Urchin, short for Citadel Urchin. Reference to his life as a duct rat and a play on wording like C-Sec.

Yeah. DI Bramante had a real talent. Not a talent for coming up with clever names. He sucked at that. A talent at being an asshole.

Upon our release from formation we headed up the stairs to our barracks to prepare for the day. By now the platoon had worked out a schedule for showering, cleaning and self inspection that always passed DI Bramante's standards.

Unfortunately, our squad was scheduled for latrine duty this morning which was never fun. Cleaning up after others gave you perspective on how much of a slob you could be.

But I suppose that was the point. Teach us discipline, pride, teamwork and attention to detail. But it still stunk. Sometimes literally. If what they were feeding us was terrible going in then it was atrocious coming out.

Normally we spent the time talking and joking but the physical training eval this morning had left us spent, hungry and cranky. So the only sounds filling the air were mops and scrubbing pads in motion.

Brad threw his pad with frustration into the sink he had just finished. "That's it. First thing I'm buying when I get to my assignment is an autoserv drone. No more scrubbing anything. This isn't what I joined to do."

"Those are illegal aboard a ship and on military installations, dumbass." Kama reminded and chastised Brad.

He looked confusedly over his shoulder, "What?"

All activity ceased as the entire squad paused to stare at him incredulously. Did he really not know? After it had been stated over and over again for the past few weeks?

Naeem voiced what we were all thinking "Haven't you been paying attention? They've only been talking about security every other day since we arrived here."

Brad remained clueless, looking at Naeem with no small amount of skepticism and eliciting groans of frustration from all the rest of us. He had this habit of missing key details that cost us dearly as a squad. Not that anyone thought he did it on purpose. He was just a fairly nice, if slow, guy, but sometimes it was difficult for the rest of us to reign in our annoyance.

Aritomo had the patience of a saint because he calmly went back to cleaning and explained, again, why it was illegal to have your own drone or mech. "UNSC Code states that unless certified by your MVC, all personal drones, mechs, and VI systems are prohibited. You have

to get special authorization from your commanding officer."

"Seriously? Are you fucking kidding me?" Brad's jaw hung low as he gaped like a fish. He glanced at the rest of us for confirmation. As if Aritomo was making this up. "I thought that was only with omnitools and stuff."

I spoke up, filling the gaps for him. "It's supposed to be a security risk. They can't be sure your drone or VI won't be hacked or used for surveillance." Tapping the inactive omnitool on my wrist I continued. "That's why they're going to confiscate our omnitools during the last week."

Hard lessons had been learned in the Interplanetary War and both Insurrections. Every history course required for graduation in the Systems Alliance showed how even a small group of rebels could cause catastrophic losses if they gained access to sensitive systems. Like sabotaging life support systems for a vessel, space station, and arcology. Or mislabeling IFF tags so that law enforcement or military forces would fire upon allies or civilians. Or overriding the navigational safety controls on a vessel capable of high end subluminal speeds and using it as an improvised weapon.

Ayana, and the woman I had accidentally fondled in this very room our first morning here, eyed Brad evenly before snorting and returning to her cleaning. "If you're that desperate to have your own drone then reclassify your MVC to engineer. Depending on their classification they get to use them for combat, maintenance or construction."

I resisted the urge to twist the knife in deeper by mentioning that the other way to be certified was becoming a commissioned officer. Call it a hunch but I had the feeling there was little chance anyone would be saluting Brad unless it was ironically.

Brad stayed silent for a moment, contemplating Ayana's words. After a beat of silence he made up his mind. "Fuck that. I joined to operate MACs on warships."

To punctuate his proclamation he made a sound that I suppose was meant to be a MAC firing accompanied with exaggerated hand gestures. As we looked on in confusion, and growing shock, he tossed the scrubbing pad at the sink and made a comical explosion sound when it impacted.

Grinning with satisfaction, he turned to look at the rest of us, gleefully saying "Orbital bombardment. It's the only way to be sure."

My grumbling stomach sunk as my appalled mind pieced together the reality of what he just said. Orbital bombardments with the cannons aboard warships was barely legal and even then only used in the most extreme of circumstances. But the UNSC was going to place this overeager lunatic at the controls of one?

That's a galactic disaster waiting to happen.

"The UNSC has to be out of their fucking mind." Anna stood in the entryway to the showers with her hands on her hips and snarled. Maintaining her glare for a beat, she finally sighed and shook her

head before turning to go back to her duties. "We don't even trust you with a damn mop."

We resumed our duties and after a few nitpicking remarks from DI Bramante we were lead to the mess hall for breakfast. As luck would have it, this was a food torture week for us. Initially I thought that I had imagined the smell of real food when I first arrived all those weeks ago. Now I wish I had.

Meals were provided under the care of the VI operated vending machines and mess hall staff. The complications came from a graduating class. As a reward they would be treated to real food during their final week at the facility while they underwent outprocessing, physicals, some surgery, and finally a graduation ceremony.

So as we patiently and silently waited in line for our rations we were treated to the pleasant torture of a full sensory experience watching these lucky fuckers on their way out of this hellhole. UCMT was done and they were just going through formalities like gorging themselves this morning on omelets, potatoes and juice.

Ugh. Juice. My stomach rumbled as the scent of the food assaulted my sense of smell, but I was too focused on staring longingly at a recruit drinking her cup of orange juice. I could practically smell the oranges and it was making my mouth water. At this point, I would be hard pressed to come up with anything I wouldn't do for a cup of real juice. Not synthesized crap. Not juice flavored powdered shake mix. Something actually squeezed, blended, pressed or pureed from a plant or vegetable. Or whatever the equivalent was on other planets. I didn't care where it came from. Earth. Thessia. Sur'Kesh. Hell, I'd drink juice from some irradiated toxic plant that grew on Tuchanka right about now.

I sighed knowing that wish wouldn't be coming true. Still, anything would be better than...

"Next up."

The dispenser scanned my identitag and brought up a display of my UNSC file, complete with medical data and UCMT schedule. From there it identified what combination of food items would best suit me given my dietary needs for the day. A second later it's analysis was done and it produced a large bottle of water, another bottle of premade nutrient shake, a tube of nutrient paste, and an energy bar.

Grabbing my items reluctantly I headed over to the dining area. Having memorized the path to my platoon's designated seating area I took the time to peruse this morning's flavors.

Pumpkin cinnamon drink. Blueberry ossilbir paste. Honey granola fiber energy bar.

Stifling another sigh, I glanced about and found my squad clumped together for meals as usual. Joining them in an open spot, I noticed everyone else was as miserable as I was. They all seemed to be glancing towards the ones eating real food with annoyance and despair.

"What'd you get?" Ayana grumbled morosely asked around a mouthful of energy bar.

I tossed my stuff on the table and grumbled, "Pumpkin, blueberry and granola."

Seated across from me, Anna peered at my bar and frowned. "How come you always get a different flavor bar than the rest of us?"

"He's a biotic. He has to eat like a pig for the training they make him do after dinner." Biao answered after grimacing from a swig of his drink. Raising the offending bottle to examine the label he scrutinized it. Perplexed by what he was reading, he asked aloud "I've never had pumpkin before. Is it supposed to taste this bad?"

"My granny makes the best pumpkin pies." Brad answered wistfully. He frowned at his own bottle. "This shit tastes more like the baskets of potpourri she keeps around her place."

At the end of the table Marta stared at him, chagrined at that bit of information. "How in the galaxy do you know what potpourri tastes like?"

I had to admit, it was a good question. We all silently waited for Brad's response while Galen, Naeem and Aritomo arrived with their meals.

Eventually Brad shrugged and looked away. Sitting next to him Kama narrowed her eyes and grinned. "Don't tell me. You used to eat it as a kid, didn't you?"

He didn't answer, but his sullen glare was all the confirmation we needed. Ayana rolled her eyes and snarked, "As often as you put your foot in your mouth we shouldn't even be surprised you got an early start just shoveling anything in."

I chuckled and popped the cap on my tube of blueberry flavored nutrient fortified ossilbir paste. Placing it to my lips and squeezing, I was rewarded with a mouthful of disgusting and slightly granular paste that tasted nothing like blueberries. I swallowed it back quickly and made a face, shivering slightly at the assault on my taste buds.

To my left, Naeem nodded in sympathy, balefully staring at his own unopened tube. "Blueberries are not supposed to taste that sour." He smacked his lips in disgust. "Or metallic"

As I steeled myself for another round of not really blueberry paste, to my right Galen swallowed back a mouthful of his bar and chimed in. "You guys are crazy. This stuff isn't that bad." As if to demonstrate his point, he chomped off a sizable chunk of his bar and chewed exaggeratedly.

The rest of the squad froze and stared at him with varying degrees of disgust and revulsion.

"Stop chewing with your mouth open. It's disgusting." Biao frowned and glared at Galen.

On the other side of Galen, Aritomo shook his head and remarked, "There is something seriously wrong with you, Kemp."

Galen shrugged and talked with his mouth half full again, causing Anna and Kama to recoil from potential flying bits of half chewed energy bar. "It beats scavenging for scraps on the Citadel without an omnitool. You don't know if something is dextro or levo until you eat it and get the stomach cramps." He swallowed and spoke more darkly, "And that's not even counting the paste the Citadel provides. I know that stuff is made out of people they make disappear."

The group quieted down and ate our meals. It might be disgusting, but we were starving. Besides, it was pointless to take the discussion further. Being a duct rat, Galen would win any contest of worst thing you ever ate. And I didn't want to know if his theory about the nutrient paste the Citadel provided to the less fortunate was accurate. He had already creeped me out enough by telling me stories about the Keepers on the Citadel.

* * *

><p>UNSC Training Facility Thirteen Firing Ranges, Highland Mountains Military Training Grounds, Vierry Territory, Reach, Epsilon Eridani, Orior Cluster; September 29th, 2572 [Standardized Earth Calendar], 1412 [Local Time, Terran Standard]

Slow and steady inhalations of breath calmed nerves. I closed my eyes in an attempt to clear my mind. Focusing on my other senses I tried to build a mental picture of my surroundings. I found that this helped to avoid tunnel vision in the flurry of range finders, motion trackers, HUD markers, aiming software, and heat management while engaging targets on the range.

Enclosed within my A/X environmental armor I could imagine the slightly warm afternoon air tinged with dust being stirred up by the heavy footsteps of armor clad range personnel.

The auditory sensor suite picked up the muffled voices of distant conversations and the murmurs of Naeem in the firing position next to me as he prayed to Allah for blessing on this test.

I readjusted my grip on the M5 assault rifle, seating it into pauldron armor plate covering my shoulder. My helmet clad head leaned and rested against the rifle.

My imagination conjured the colorful and hyperactive HUD that would soon grace the interior of my helmet's faceplate.

Laying on the ground in a prone position, I could feel the various plates that comprised my combat armor make it impossible to get comfortable. The thigh plate on my left leg was pinching into my hip and the chest plate was making it hard to get a full breath as it prevented me from fully expanding my lungs.

Of course, combat effectiveness in armor did not translate to comfort while laying around face first on the ground.

"Ready on the right."

At the sound in my earpieces, my eyes snapped open and I blinked them

several times to get my vision set as I quickly readjusted the grip on my rifle. Today was our final eval for basic weapons proficiency. Every UNSC serviceman was required to be able to wield an assault rifle at minimum. Once we moved on to our MVC schools we would be trained and tested on further weapon systems as our MVC required. Which meant that I could look forward to plenty of range time in the future as an infantryman.

"Ready on the left."

This was no simple marksmanship test like the targeting sims we had been drilled through before. That was only the beginning of what we would be graded upon. The five terran minute long eval was to gauge our basic ability to manage a battlefield situation. Heat management. Enemy distance. Number of targets eliminated.

Targets were a combination VI controlled mechs and drones. All heavily shielded models the UNSC used. Once the eval started they would be activated one at a time in each recruit's lane of fire every ten seconds at a range of three hundred meters during the first minute of the test for a total of six mechs. The mechs were unarmed but the VI would have them work in unison to advance on the recruit using all available cover. If the shielding system of a mech was broken the mech would deactivate and be considered 'dead'. If any mechs came within ten meters of the recruit it was an automatic failure.

Simply put, the goal was to avoid being overwhelmed and eliminate as many mechs as possible in the allotted time. Mechs still standing did not count against your final score, but their proximity did. In fact it was possible to pass the eval with a high score and still have all six mechs standing provided you kept them at bay.

Finally, during the eval the range personnel would send an error message to your rifle that simulated a spent ammo block that you needed to replace.

Most people bought the bullshit from vids and games where the hero's weapon never ran out of ammo and fired forever, but real combat wasn't so lucky or glamorous. Even being able to fire thousands of rounds without reloading wasn't enough. Not when enemy shielding regenerated. Not when VI controlled mechs aided enemy formations. Not when your weapon was capable of sending hundreds of rounds downrange in under a minute. And not when real deployments saw you stationed in remote areas of barely colonized worlds or the uncharted frontiers of space where back up was hours, days or weeks away.

"All ready on the firing lane. Evaluation is live. Recruits, switch your rifles from safe to active. Engage targets at will. Good luck."

Activating my rifle brought on a slight vibration that traveled up through my right arm. A small holographic display appeared over the rifle, providing sights and basic information. The interior of my helmet's faceplate sprang to life as the HUD registered the sync between my armor and weapon. As the diagnostic readout cleared and the weapon primed for use the first customer ventured out. A scarred and battered Loki that look like it had seen better days. It darted forward to a ruined vehicle chassis at about two hundred ninety five meters.

Having completed over a handful of live fire exercises like this, not to mention countless sims and drills, I had a grasp by now of the basic strategy the VI employed. It would wait for the second mech before going on the offensive, using timed jumps from cover to keep me off balance while sometimes sacrificing a mech or two to advance the group as whole.

My rifle honed in on the vehicle, detecting the Loki behind it, but the rounds in my rifle would never punch through the metal of the chassis and then the mech's shielding with any efficiency. I waited, cycling through my sensors for signs it was trying to sneak past as I kept a wary eye on my HUD for contestant number two.

The HUD pinged a soft tone into my ear pieces and a flashing icon surrounded a portion of the haptic display across my vision before locking in on the signature of a Fenris bounding into my firing lane. It's fast, aggressive advance gave the Loki enough time to scramble to a new position.

Deciding the Fenris was the primary threat at the moment, I took aim and squeezed the trigger. My M5 rifle surged as I ignored the slight tingle from the wave of static electricity it produced. It kicked and began spitting hypersonic rounds which stopped the Fenris cold. It's shielding crackled to life in a shimmer of indigo and gold as it lunged to the left to hide behind a low berm made of soil and shattered barricade blocks.

Now where was that Loki? Scanning the debris and obstacles provided nothing meaning it was hiding behind something dense and was not moving.

Once again the sensors pinged and my HUD targeted a new threat, a Valkyrie drone flying above. It didn't make an immediate advance, choosing to adopt a deliberately erratic pattern instead. It dived low to hide behind the vehicle chassis it's buddy the Loki had originally used. Pausing there momentarily, the Valkyrie propelled itself upward and forward in plain view as if to taunt me.

As tempting as it was to open fire I had recognized this trick from the VI. A distraction technique. If these mechs were armed, then the Valkyrie would be the highest priority by far with it's aerial vantage point. But the name of the game for this eval was denial. The Valkyrie was trying to draw my attention, and hopefully fire, while the other two mechs advanced.

As if to prove my point, the Fenris rolled around the far left end of it's protective berm. Making a sharp turn in my direction, it resumed it's suicidal charge.

I paused, waiting to see the accompanying actions of the Loki or Valkyrie. If I waited a bit longer the Fenris would reach a kill zone without substantial cover in any direction for at least ten meters. I could pick it off before it could hide.

Another ping sounded in my ears as my HUD targeted a new threat. Another Fenris, but I ignored it in favor of aiming down on it's twin. When it had entered the kill zone my rifle erupted in a torrent of rounds. Once more it's shielding flared but this time it would not have a chance to find shelter.

Using two carefully controlled bursts I watched as the Fenris stumbled and tried to move to safety. Idly I noticed the tracking on my HUD signal that the other three mechs were using the sacrifice of their ally to advance, as I knew they would. Another ping and series of warnings announced the entrance of a second Loki to the playing field.

As my target tried to advance to an overturned k-rail, I engaged it with one long steady final burst. This time I split my attention between aiming and watching the heat generation indicator synced with my rifle. Maintaining a withering assault, my rifle was pushing the limits of an overheat shutdown when the shielding broke in a resounding snap accompanied with indigo and gold sparks. I released the trigger but several more rounds still clipped the Fenris in it's hind quarters, causing it to stagger even more. It's forward momentum carried it forward into a face first skid before the weight of it's rear flipped it over into a roll that stopped when it's body slammed into the k-rail it wanted to get to so badly.

A ping and HUD tracking showed the final contestant, another Loki, had joined the fray. One down, five more to go.

The Valkyrie had advanced slightly, still using it's erratic pattern in hopes of drawing my attention. The first Loki was trying to skulk along the right. The second Fenris wasn't nearly as bold as it's defeated twin, choosing to bound carefully from cover to cover with lengthy pauses in between. The final two Lokis were still lingering in the rear.

I decided to deal with the drone as the other four were not moving out of cover long enough to strip their shielding.

Larger than the personal drones used in various formats, the Valkyrie was a security and military model. Which meant that despite it's nimble flight capabilities, it was still a large target. Easily a meter or so big. Unfortunately, it's size and design meant it had housed robust shielding, unlike it's smaller cousins.

Aiming my rifle on the hovering pest initiated an automated defensive tactic of evasive maneuvers. This made it troublesome to hit, but it did allow for the exposure of a weakness.

The UNSC, like all military and mercenary forces, used a variety of mechs, or unmanned combat platforms, to minimize the threats to their personnel and augment the strength of forces spread thin across thousands of light years and hundreds of interests.

The Valkyrie relied upon thrusters that were comparatively small to it's size and weight. Barely enough to keep it aloft and moving. As the drone tried to maintain rapid directional changes, the drone's eezo core and thrusters were prone to overheat failure and reduction in power.

Of course this was no mistake in the engineering. The drones were meant to be used in swarms as support for ground forces. Their production value and low price made them expendable provided they did their job of harassing and distracting the enemy.

I stayed dialed in and found my moment of opportunity when the drone

seemed to become sluggish. It had climbed too high to avoid becoming a target.

My first burst was slightly off. Barely clipping it's upper half, but still enough to activate the shielding. Adjusting my aim quickly I held the trigger longer than was advisable, sending a lengthy burst dead center. The shielding flared, held, and then burst into the telltale gold and indigo sparks.

The drone's rapid descent turned into a free fall that ended with an awkward series of bounces.

Two down, four to go and definitely more than one minute off the clock.

A targeting designation running across my line of sight brought my attention back to the lead Loki which had closed the distance to a little more than a hundred ninety meters.

On it's trail were the other two Loki's and the remaining Fenris.

I frowned as I contemplated my options. The VI had sacrificed two mechs within the first two minutes or so in order to advance nearly a third of the distance. Even more troubling was that the spent ammo block error had yet to manifest meaning there was at least a five to ten second window coming up where the VI could advance the mechs unmolested. Considering I figured to still have about three minutes left I was facing the reality of a very hectic and pressure packed ending.

Seeing no other option than to being applying pressure to halt the advance, I targeted on the first Loki as it leapt over a k-rail it had been crouching behind.

The burst of slugs slammed against the kinetic barrier, causing the Loki to retreat by rolling back over the top of the k-rail. I glanced at the progress of the others and saw they were still being methodical but cautious.

It would seem my fears were correct. The VI was going to play it safe and slowly advance until the ammo block error.

Best I could hope for was to make the distance it had to cover wider. Easier said than done, but if I was successful then I bought myself a bit more breathing room at the end.

The lead Loki broke from cover and I pelted it with automatic fire. Unlike the last time, it bravely continued it's course as it's shielding bore the brunt of my assault, diving behind the nearest cover. I grinned evilly as I saw it was a haphazard stack of empty transport containers. Earlier training sessions had taught me these plastic containers were not strong enough to withstand the penetration of mass accelerated slugs.

The courageous dash now looked like it was the break I had been waiting for.

I took aim on center mass of my HUD display of the Loki behind the containers and let it rip. I couldn't tell if my aim was working, but a split second later the gold and indigo hue coming from behind the

containers was all the proof I needed. One long, steady burst and I was rewarded with a shower of gold and indigo sparks shooting upwards like fireworks, completely vindicating my decision.

Three down and maybe under three minutes to go?

Viewing the status of the remaining mechs left me with few opportunities. They were moving almost perfectly in sync and safely bounding between cover. To focus fire on one would be to allow the other two to move ahead with impunity. I did my best, firing short bursts whenever they exposed themselves and sometimes causing them to abandon their next move, but largely I was fighting a losing battle. In between shots I was trying to observe the terrain left and found the best spot to make my next stand. There was a slight ditch at about the hundred meter mark creating an extended gap that would give me a crack at stripping shields.

So I continued to bide my time engaging the mechs with harassing bursts. It still wasn't as successful as I would have liked, but it did slow them down a bit. Time was my biggest enemy as it seemed to drag on as my nerves ratcheted higher and higher awaiting the error.

In response to my strategy, the mechs were becoming bolder in their moves until the first Loki reached the edge of the ditch. Once safely situated behind cover, the mech became patient. It didn't take a slipstream scientist to figure out the mechs were going to toe the line and then move as one, forcing me to pick which one I wanted to shoot. Which meant the VI was going to go on the offensive and sacrifice a mech. The final push was about to begin.

I rolled my shoulders to loosen the tension and began clicking my tongue nervously. My HUD didn't display time for this eval in order to preserve the realism of the trial but I figured that we had to be well past the three minute mark at this point.

Finally that first Loki raced out from behind cover triggering the push forward. I was ready when it showed it's face. Or faceless head. Whatever.

The flaring of it's shielding and slight stagger let me know my first burst was on target. A second burst pushed the limits of the Loki's shielding and put my weapon half way to overheating. I figured I needed on more squeeze of the trigger to finish off the mech and maybe still have enough time to harass one of the others.

So of course that's the moment when the ammo block error happens.

My mouth spewed out a string of invectives that questioned the sort of relationship the range personnel had with their mothers as I activated the release on the upper portion of my rifle. In a move that had been drilled into memory, I held the rifle angled away so the intense heat that was vented wouldn't melt my fingers or face off if I wasn't wearing my A/X armor. The still serviceable ammo block was ejected, hitting the damp ground beside me with a sizzle, while I grasped at the storage pouches on my waist for another. Once in hand I slapped it into the slot, closed the rifle and readjusted my hold to fire it again.

As the rifle synced the diagnostic checklist to my HUD I focused

through my anger to watch the mechs begin closing in on the eighty five meter mark. A soft beep drew my attention to the green rifle icon on my HUD, signaling it was operational again.

The Fenris had adopted the sort of reckless charge that had doomed it's twin. While my first instinct was to mow it down like I had done the other the situation had changed. I had about seventy five meters to defend and maybe a minute and a half left. I could try and attempt to take an aggressive stance by eliminating the mechs one by one. But the room for error was practically nil. One of them would sneak past. So my other option was to play it safe and continue my strategy of defense. Harassing bursts to run out the clock.

The fear of failing made the decision for me. I'd rather pass and have a lower score than I would have liked than try and aim for a higher score but probably fail.

I let a lengthy burst fly at the Fenris, stopping it cold as it sought cover. Instead of trying to finish it off I switched to the nearest Loki and repeated my actions before moving on to the other Loki. If the VI was going to be aggressive then I had to be equally ferocious in my attempt to dissuade it from trying to move forward.

After what seemed like an eternity of spreading my bursts of fire across all three targets I began to feel a sense of dread. The VI clearly thought it could steal a victory at the end by forcing me to fire my rifle quickly and repeatedly. Eventually my weapon would overheat and activate the emergency venting process. That would cost me precious seconds and give the VI the opportunity it needed.

It was too late now to change strategies but I clearly was no longer holding the upper hand. As a consequence my bursts became sloppy. Frantic. I chastised myself while keeping an eye on my heat management indicator. My rifle was no longer fully discharging all the heat from a burst before I fired another.

When the mechs broke the forty meter barrier I began to worry. Had I miscalculated how much time I had left? What if my strategy to run out the clock had been the wrong choice?

My panic saw me losing my composure. I was firing wildly. Spraying as opposed to trying to target my bursts. Dragging my barrel from mech to mech without fully releasing the trigger. My mind was betraying me with conclusions I knew were ridiculous, like that the VI could sense my desperation.

I swore under my breath when I missed a Loki entirely as it crossed the thirty meter threshold. And that lapse in focus allowed the Fenris to move to a final obstacle at the twenty five meter mark.

My heart pounded in my chest as my hands began to shake. I was done. I was going to fail. DI Bramante was going to make my life a living hell and then I would have to take this eval again.

"Time has expired on the range. The evaluation is concluded. Weapons have been deactivated. I repeat, the evaluation is concluded."

The voice in my ears startled me. It was over? I was nearly paralyzed in confusion as all the mechs in my firing lane arose and begin

moving back towards their starting point at the three hundred meter mark. Like they hadn't been trying to defeat me seconds ago.

Too numb to think clearly, I lowered my rifle and rose to my knees. I had actually passed? Looking around I could see the other recruits moving off the firing line and talking among themselves. It was surreal. Placing my rifle on the magnetic strips along my back and removing my helmet I stood to join them. I did the mental math. Three mechs stills standing. Very little distance left. But no overheats. All in all, not bad. Not great, but not bad.

Naeem wandered towards me, helmet under his arm and appearing despondent. Shaking the cobwebs loose from my own shock I greet him, curious as to how he did "Hey. So how'd you do?"

He shrugged, in an obvious funk. "Two mechs left but I screwed up at the end."

I peered at him, curious to know what he meant, and he simply explained. "Overheat."

A grimace and sympathetic grunt was about all I could respond with.

"Hey, Luis. When did your error happen?" Galen had snuck up behind me and sounds more than a bit annoyed.

Turning to face him, I scowled at the memory of the unfortunate timing for my error. "Hundred meter mark. I had a Loki beat. Just one more fucking burst."

Galen's own scowl mirrored my own as he shook his head, becoming even more surly. "I knew it. They did that shit on purpose. They dropped mine less than ten seconds after the final mech entered."

Ouch. Now I knew why he was so pissed.

Naeem hissed at Galen's luck before asking him how he fared. "So how many did you end with?"

He continued stewing and grumbled "Two Valkyries." Galen lost a bit of his fire and became pensive, "I'm pretty sure I cheated."

We stared in shock over his admission. How was that even possible? Naeem voice his bewilderment. "How the hell did you do that?"

Galen's eyes became shifty as he nervously replied. "I kept using the Valkyrie's auto evade to stall them so I could focus on the others."

My expression lightened as I contemplated that. It didn't sound like cheating. More like a smart move. Hell, even if it was cheating, using the VI's programming against it was fair game as far as I was concerned.

Having more distance from the emotions that consumed me during the eval I was able to think clearly. That VI had been more devious and effective than in our training sessions. I decided to voice my thoughts to see if I wasn't alone in that observation. "Did you guys

notice the VI was a tougher opponent this time around?"

Galen shrugged and continued to sulk, still upset over his performance, but Naeem narrowed his eyes and nodded his head. "Yeah. I doubt anyone scores a perfect on this."

Anna chose that moment to wander over to us. She looked thrilled and could barely contain herself. Her greeting was even excited, bordering on bubbly and cheerful, which was out of character for her. "Hey! How'd you guys do?"

We collectively shrugged, unsure of how to gauge ourselves beyond what we had already talked about.

A chime in my earpieces alerted me to an incoming message. Since I doubted my family would be sending me mail right about now, I knew this was the scores for the eval. I activated my omnitool and the holographic display of the results hovered above my left wrist.

I skimmed through it quickly, picking up the highlights. Eighty nine percent. Passing. Ninth place.

I sighed with relief. I had passed. Ninth place in the platoon wasn't so bad. After all, Naeem was probably right. Nobody aced that test.

Galen's muttered fuck confirmed my optimism. But I really should have known better after the timing of the ammo block error. The universe always finds a new way to fuck with me. This time it was with Anna's fist pump and victorious holler. "Perfect score!"

My jaw slackened and I almost dropped my helmet as I stared at her in a daze. Did she just say perfect score? She had to be kidding, right? If my mind could work right now I'd wonder how she did it. Instead I was left with misfiring synapses and the creeping feeling that I didn't do so well after all.

If it was any consolation Anna was doing her best to prove she had no concept of rhythm with whatever little victory dance she was performing.

Well, to be fair, the combat armor didn't help either. No one looks good shaking their ass in about twenty kilos of interlocking armor plates and a helmet.

Galen glared at her balefully before shaking his head, leaning towards me to ask, "You think we should tell her how stupid she looks right now?"

I'd like to say my sense of fair play and good will urged me on to let her have her moment, but really my own sour attitude was the deciding factor. Watching her flailing her arms and wiggling her hips in some off beat manner without a care in the galaxy, my grin slowly spread as I noticed more and more of the platoon, and even DI Bramante, wondering what the hell she was doing. "No. This is making me feel better."

* * *

><p>Orias Mountains, Highland Mountains Military Training

Grounds, Vierry Territory, Reach, Epsilon Eridani, Orior Cluster;
October 7th, 2572 [Standardized Earth Calendar], 0544 [Local Time,
Terran Standard]

The pinging alert in my earpieces stirred me from the drowsy haze I was drifting in and out of. I was on early morning guard duty for our bivouac site and operating on about four hours of sleep after a full grueling day of training yesterday.

Still the end was in sight as we were on the final leg of our training here on Reach. This last phase was a two week long field exercise designed to test us on everything we'd been trained on since we started.

At first my impression was that DI Bramante was leading us aimlessly through the Highland Mountains for the hell of it, but it seemed there was a method to his madness. Every destination was a training facility for us to pass final tests and exams. Yesterday had been several obstacle courses that left me exhausted and bruised all over. We had camped for the night several kilometers away at this current location and that was how I found myself fighting to stay awake.

And the reason we needed guard duty? Well this wasn't some leisurely camping trip. We had been subjected to raids and ambushes throughout. Mechs. Soldiers. Drones. You name it. If that wasn't bad enough, there were two other major training exercises concurrent with our own in the Highland Mountains. The 22nd Army Colonial Division and the 34th Marine Frontier Division were having a joint training exercise while special forces candidates were holding their second phase of training.

So we were technically an 'enemy' unit in their eyes for training purposes. It had been kind of neat, at first, to try and ambush special forces soldiers or play cat and mouse games with mechanized infantry, but for the most part we were appetizers. They trounced us regularly and decisively. That got old real fast.

So the alert only made me think that another potential ass kicking was imminent and that didn't fill me with enthusiasm. I blinked twice to clear the sleep from my vision before observing the various streams of data on my HUD to see what had caused the alert. My eyes locked onto vague blips near the edge of my motion tracker's range. Sporadic and spread apart, but definitely a grouping.

Staring through the colorful mess that cluttered my visor I peered down the slope from the ridge we had camped upon but all I could make out were pine trees that faded into the thick morning mist that normally enveloped the Highlands Mountains. Frowning, I couldn't discern anything and neither could the on board VI identification system built into my suit but my motion tracker definitely showed there was movement.

Not for the first time I bemoaned having to wear this fully sealed environmental suit and suffering the sensory deprivation it caused. All the sensors in the world couldn't replace the feeling of your own senses but the instructors stated over and over that it was a matter of becoming acclimated to the suits.

If there was one upside to the suit, besides the protection it provided, was that some of the sensors were able to detect things my

own senses never could. I slowly activated my omnitool in low visibility mode and selected my thermal sensors, which was then displayed across my HUD. What I saw confused me even more. There were several tall and thin sources of heat spaced throughout the trees below. I couldn't see them clearly, but they were there, confirming my motion tracker's alert.

When they didn't really move I grew suspicious. This could be a trap or a false alarm.

Making sure my voice module was deactivated, I spoke into my helmet, letting the voice activated software send my transmission over our local encrypted network. "Post Command, Post Six. Motion tracker pinged non friendlies. Thermal imaging confirms. No confirmed target count or IFF signatures. Targets have not moved from location. Over."

My squad had guard duty for this shift and Galen and Anna were handling the command post. While I waited for their reply I aimed my rifle at the thermal targets to get an estimate on ranges while also keeping a wary eye out that this was a trick.

After a few seconds Galen's voice replied "Post Six, Post Command. Understood. Sending QRF to your location. Out."

My heart skipped a beat when new blips appeared on my motion tracker. When I realized they were green in hue from friendly IFF tracking I relaxed. Soon the rustling and scrapping of the QRF crawling to my position was followed by several of my platoon mates, First Squad, to appear on my left and right.

"What have you got?" The transmission came over from the person to my right, marked as S. Bilencourt. I racked my mind and came up with the name Serge, a guy from Terra Nova.

Using my rifle to gesture down the slope I replied back over comms "Twenty, maybe twenty five meters. Between the trees. Can't miss them."

Serge went silent as I assumed he was viewing them via his thermal imaging but I couldn't tell behind the polarization of his faceplate. After a few seconds I was left with little doubt that he was as clueless as I was about what to do next.

"Have you tried contacting them?" DI Bramante's low voice cut through the silence on the comms channel. As one we turned our heads to look at him, surprised by his presence and even more so by his suggestion. I couldn't see his reaction through his own faceplate, but his characteristic growl and snark gave me a clue. "Perhaps instead of staring at my dreamy self you should keep an eye on the potential enemy, shitbricks."

Just as quickly as we had turned to look at him our heads spun back to look down the slope, half expecting the mysterious targets to have charged forward.

Serge fiddled with his own omnitool and a moment later his voice was amplified through the speaker module in his helmet. "Identify yourself or we will open fire."

The slight echo reverberating throughout the canyon below made me wince. If they didn't know where we were before, then they sure do now.

A series of squawks and rustling in the trees combined with the motion tracker exploding in activity answered Serge's command. I was completely baffled by this response. Besides me Serge had forgotten to deactivate his voice module so everyone heard his clearly puzzled mumbling "C'est quoi ce bordel?"

I frowned, trying to translate it in my head but a rock sailing over my head into the mist covered treeline below brought all thinking to a halt. It smacked into a tree, snapping branches before hitting the ground and tumbling a bit more down the slope. The squawks from before grew into a chorus of frightened, inhuman shrieks as the motion tracker showed the group to be much larger than I had anticipated. It was dispersing in all directions, including directly toward us. I tightened the grip on my rifle, staring as several thermal signatures bobbed and weaved through trees as came closer and closer.

A final piercing screech announced the arrival of the targets and I couldn't feel any more stupid. They were tall and thin, standing on two powerful hind legs that supported a torso covered in fur like feathers. A long serpentine neck supported a small head tipped with a thick and ferocious beak. When they spotted us their advance came to a halt and began flapping their wings and stomping the the ground with large taloned feet. After another moment of this impromptu showdown, the creatures reversed course and ran back into the mist to join their brethren far away from us.

Moas. I had raised the alarm over a flock of Moas. If everyone had been confused before, they were gobsmacked and a bit annoyed now.

"Congratulations, Recruit Elvis. You just foiled the Moa Revolution. Securing the future of food production of Reach for generations to come." My Drill Instructor's deadpan snark over his voice module pierced the shocked stillness and grated on my nerves. "Good to know we have someone like you out there on the watch for important shit like this. Now if you could prevent the Guta Conspiracy I might put you in for a Star of Terra."

I leaned forward into my rifle and slowly beat my helmet clad head into it, embarrassed and annoyed with myself.

He stood from his kneeling position and yelled loudly across the campsite. "Rise and shine, Recruits! It's another fantastic morning on Reach. Absolutely beautiful." Placing his hands on his hips, he surveyed the platoon stirring from their slumber, "Do you recruits realize people pay perfectly good credits to do this? Camping in nature. Shooting random animals. And you get it for free. Hell, we're paying you. It is glorious to wear the uniform of the UNSC, am I right, recruits?"

Most everyone grumbled at his over the top enthusiasm but knew better than to disappoint him, "Yes, Drill Instructor!"

Thirty minutes later, plus a healthy serving of not really food, the platoon was ready to hit the road for our final day on this field

exercise. I couldn't wait to return to the barracks and shower before taking the galaxy's longest nap. Just one more day to go. DI Bramante stood, activating a portable holotank and displayed today's route. "We're going to head down the southern slope into the valley below. We'll follow it out until we hit the river and trail that for the rest of the morning." He shut off the holotank and gathered his own gear "Remember your spacing and pacing. Fourth, you've got point. Second, Third and Fifth in that order. First you've got caboose. Beware of the remnants of the Moa Revolution that Recruit Shepard stopped."

I sat down with my back against a rock and scowled, not at all amused with his joke. The only good thing was that my squad would not have any additional duties for the march this morning.

Speaking of which, the rest of my squad came strolling over and took a seat nearby, using the opportunity to relax until it was our turn.

Anna popped off her helmet to rake her fingers through the short fuzz on her head. When she had finished, she glanced my way with a sly smirk, "So what's this I hear about you almost catching breakfast, Shepard?"

Not in the mood for games I glared at her and snapped back "Fuck off, Vasilyeva."

She just grinned at getting the response she wanted from me and slid her helmet back on, "Gladly, if you had been a gentleman and gotten me breakfast in bed."

The squad chuckled at her teasing and I continued to stew. Leaning my head back against the rock, I closed my eyes and ignored everyone.

I must have dozed off because I was startled when Galen kicked my leg. We formed into our two smaller fire teams and performed a last minute gear check. Once clear and ready, Ayana gave the signal and we began our descent from the ridge and into the mist.

The morning was mostly silent, only the roar of the occasional dropship or gunship breaking the peace as they flew by overhead. The real problem was the mist, which clung to my visor, forming droplets that obscured my vision and had to be wiped away periodically. Once we neared the valley floor the mist stayed behind, becoming an overhead cloud layer just above us.

After a few uneventful hours we had reached the river trails and were given a much needed short break before pushing forward. The pace would be slower from here on out as the roads and terrain near the river were well traveled.

Eventually we deviated onto a small dirt trail leading away from the river valley and back into the mountains. Following this trail for another hour we came to a clearing surrounding a large building that seemed so out of place amongst the hills and trees. Fourth and Second squads were already lounging about while they waited on the rest of us to arrive. DI Bramante was near the building conversing with several people clad in A/X armor with the characteristic red shoulder plates that signified range personnel. I could only assume they ran this facility.

Ayana lead us over to the other squads and we joined them in taking a seat, happy to be off our feet. We all took the time to nod off until the other two squads trickled in.

DI Bramante's booming voice yelling for formation woke me from my second cat nap of the day. I scrambled with the rest to stand in formation and await orders.

Calling for a relaxed posture, he broke into the explanation of today's training and testing. "Recruits! You have spent nearly two weeks in your A/X MCU. By now you should be well acquainted with the maintenance and operation of it. Combined with your combat armor system, it is the most important piece of equipment issued to you. It does not matter the branch, it does not matter the assignment. This uniform will save your life, allowing you to survive temperatures that would normally fry or freeze you. To move about in environments that would choke you. It will even allow you to survive the harshness of vacuum."

Gesturing behind himself toward the range personnel who stood by awaiting their turn, DI Bramante continued, "We took our morning stroll here so these good people could put you and your suits through their paces. So give them your full attention. I do not want to have to send a message to the people who spawned you about how you died because you didn't take this seriously."

He motioned to one of the range staff who nodded and stepped forward, taking over with a loud and energetic voice. "Good afternoon, Third Platoon!"

"Sir! Good Afternoon, Sir!" Even through the voice modules our reply was crisp and booming. Nearly four months of conditioning had gotten us to be automatic.

The man nodded in a way that showed he was pleased, and continued "Outstanding. That's what I like to hear. You sound like you're ready for some hardcore training. Before we get started, I'll introduce myself. I am Gunnery Chief Sergeant Seong. I run this facility and I expect people to have a good time and follow all rules, understood?"

"Sir! Yes, sir!"

"Normally two weeks out in the field makes platoons of recruits smell like a troop of sweaty apes, but if your suits are working, then I can't tell. So let's keep it that way, huh?"

We chuckled nervously at his humor and friendliness. Another aspect of the four months of conditioning was that instructors in a good mood always meant trouble.

"Now, I'd much rather cart your asses into orbit and see how many of you meet Saint Elisa, but the UNSC frowns on instructors intentionally killing recruits. Me and my range crew have to put in an effort to at least make it look like an accident."

Aaaaaaand there was the trouble. Bramante, Seong and the rest of the range personnel must have thought the prospect of our deaths was hilarious because they broke out into chuckles and snickers.

Seong continued, still cheerful "Not a problem, recruits. Our compromise is the building behind me. Inside are two sealed rooms that simulate inhospitable environments. Once inside you will experience ten Terran minutes safe and snug in your A/X MCU."

My worries faded away, slightly, That didn't sound so bad. I figured we'd do some drills inside these chambers, but that sounded relatively tame as far as evals go.

But when Sergeant Seong produced a combat knife and held it aloft menacingly I knew my hopes had been dashed.

"That's when you'll be introduced to Mister Ripper here. Your Drill Instructor has taught you how to repair tears and punctures in that fancy suit of yours. What I want you to do is prove it to me and my staff. Repair your suit in a dangerous situation. Focus and fight through your fear and pain."

This time the conditioning wasn't enough. There was a noticeable hesitation before a much weaker "Sir! Yes, sir!"

Sergeant Seong nodded and walked back towards his staff to discuss matters. DI Bramante resumed his place at the front and issued orders in his usual gruff way. "Drop your gear and weapons where you are. Third and First, you're up. The rest of you stand by."

I reluctantly undid the straps on my rucksack and let it fall to the ground before I laid my weapon atop it. A glance around told me the rest of the platoon was as keen as I was to be stabbed inside a sealed chamber with a toxic atmosphere.

We filed into a small hallway and were instructed to line up with our backs against the wall on either side. Across from me I could see Serge nervously fingering the medical and repair kits along his belt. I quickly reached down in a panic to ensure my own were there, fearful that I might enter this chamber and start the test missing critical equipment.

While we waited, two of the range personnel came by and scanned each of us with their omnitools, checking the integrity of our suits and our medical status. When that was complete, the door to the outside was shut, leaving us in darkness. The lowlight filter of my HUD flickered on, putting everything in a sickly green hue outlined in neon green or red. Sergeant Seong stood at the far end of the hallway and barked "Enter the chambers, recruits."

Doors on either side of the hallway opened and my squad quickly entered the one to the left with one of the range personnel and, surprisingly, DI Bramante. The door sealed and hissed as the small room was lit in a creepy red light. A moment later, another door in that small room opened leading into the larger actual chamber.

We entered and were told to stand in a single file line. My HUD flashed an environmental warning. Unbreathable nitrogen and krypton mixture at a very cold negative fifty five degrees. A countdown timer appeared in the corner of my HUD informing me I had about fifty eight minutes worth of air.

I lifted my gloved hand to move through the thicker atmosphere,

swirling small crystals that glittered all around me in the air. For it being so cold I was surprised at how warm I felt inside the suit. It wasn't exactly toasty, but I could hardly tell the temperature difference.

The range instructor brought my attention back to the eval when he spoke through our linked comms "Alright, as you can see none of you are asphyxiating or going into hypothermia."

If he was hoping to calm my nerves he really sucked at this. All he really did was just reinforce how frighteningly dangerous this test was going to be.

He carried on, explaining what our next step was "To get you to trust your suit more we're going to spend the next ten minutes doing a little experimentation. Nothing serious. Just enough for you to realize your suit can take plenty of abuse." His voice lost it's softer tone and he growled at us "Front leaning rest position, move! Twenty. Knock 'em out, recruits."

I almost recoiled as my hands touched the floor. For the first time I got a feeling of just how cold it was in the room. It wasn't unbearable, but it was clear just how much the suit was protecting me from. I placed my hands back down and began the pushups, curiously watching as my HUD kept recalculating how much air I had left based upon my current consumption rate.

And so it continued with the range instructor having us perform various exercises or recite general information. He even had us sing 'Twinkle Twinkle Little Star' in harmony, which I'm positive had no purpose for the test other than to waste time and amuse him.

"Well now it's obvious why all of you are here. I've heard a drunken volus that carried a tune better." The range instructor shook his head and mocked us, "Alright, enough fun and games. The testing portion will now commence. Spread out, double arms width apart."

I lifted my arms to gauge the distance before realizing I was on one end of the line. Either I'd be the first or last one to be tested. My heart began pounding as I began remembering all the necessary steps to repair a tear in my suit. When the range instructor removed his knife from the scabbard attached to his chestplate I lost all ability to focus.

He walked around the far end of the squad, away from me, and disappeared behind us. We all followed him with our eyes until we were craning our necks and twisting in place to keep an eye on him. DI Bramante, who up until this point had been silently leaning against a wall, snapped at us "Eyes forward. You'll all get your turn soon enough."

Obedying the command, I faced the wall in front of me and tried calming myself while I waited for whatever would happen.

I didn't have to wait long. Ayana's startled yelp and the warning on my HUD that her suit was compromised gave me all the answer I was looking for. I would be the last one.

DI Bramante sauntered over to me and began engaging in conversation as if nothing were amiss. Like we were not locked in a pressurized

chamber with a toxic atmosphere and some psycho who is paid to stab us in the back. "How are you feeling, Recruit Elvis?"

I hesitated at answering the question. How am I feeling? What do you think, asshole? But then it occurred to me yet again that I was the last in line. He was going to use me as a distraction to keep everyone's minds off the eval. I swallowed back my disrespectful remarks, mindful that I was going to be stabbed soon so I shouldn't give the range instructor any incentive to jab me worse than he already intended to. "Good, Drill Instructor!"

He chuckled and folded his arms, tilting his helmet clad head to the side. I couldn't see his face behind the polarized faceplate, but I knew it had to be that insufferable condescending smirk. "Don't sound like it. Afraid of a little hands on training, Moa Killer?"

Gritting my teeth to hold in the rage I had at his taunting, I was distracted by Brad's loud hiss of pain and another squad status indicator showing he had a suit failure. Breathing deeply, I glared at my Drill Instructor and calmly replied "No, Drill Instructor!"

His tone became questioning "Outer colonies, right? Born on Mindoir?"

My mind went blank as I contemplated why he would even bother bringing up where I was born right now. Another warning showed Aritomo had a suit failure now. I watched the status lights indicators for a moment, attempting to gather my wits. Ayana's indicator showed she had resolved her suit rupture and was okay. I let loose a breath I hadn't realized I was holding and replied "Yes, Drill Instructor."

His intentions became clear when he dropped the next bombshell "Damn shame what happened there. You join to kill pirates, Moa Killer?"

I was stunned. I barely heard Kama gasp and whimper or saw the updated squad status on my HUD. When I didn't reply, DI Bramante lost his curious tone and became aggressive, "Hard of hearing, Recruit Elvis? Did you or did you not join to kill pirates?"

This had to be a trick question. There was no other explanation. I mean, of all the times to ask something like this... Marta's grunt and the updated status shook me from my stupor. Brad and Aritomo's suits were resolved. Slowly the confusion and memories of home morphed into indignation. "No, Drill Instructor!"

His voice maintained it's edge but became dubious "Why not? I would be if they had killed people I know. What MVC did you sign up for, recruit?"

Anna's shrill scream and the increasing anxiety of the entire situation was making it hard to be rational. My mind was split between suppressing rage and steeling myself for the rapidly approaching knife. "Bravo Series Marines, Drill Instructor!"

"You have got to be shitting me, recruit. Light Infantry Marines? If Russia doesn't tear you up and spit you out then a few tours in the Terminus and Traverse will." He stepped closer, invading my personal space and growled "You looking forward to killing some Batarians,

recruit? Maybe some Covenant?"

A memory of that batarian staring back at me with more contempt and fury than I had ever seen flooded my conscious. He had been there, probably killed my parents, and I had lacked the will to kill him. A sense of regret and shame made me wish I could have another chance to kill him. Or any batarians. The whole fucking race was worthless. Taking slaves. But that wasn't the point of the UNSC. We didn't just go around killing people.

Biao's grunting stirred me to weakly reply "No, Drill Instructor."

DI Bramante roared, not at all pleased with my answer "What the fuck do you think a Bravo Series Marine does? Use harsh language? Play hide and seek with Innies? Run back to tell the Alliance Parliament or Council what the big mean xenos are doing?" He backed off, shaking his head and calming himself "Lemme guess? You joined to get away from home? See the galaxy? Stick your dick in random things?"

His remarks hit their mark. My guilt and shame from earlier amplified, making me defensive. "No, Drill Instructor!"

He shouted over Naeem's groan. "Then you'd best get comfortable real quick with your inner bastard, recruit. The UNSC fights the motherfuckers that want to harm the human race. Innies. Pirates. Hegemony. Covenant. Doesn't fucking matter. They pose a threat, we take them down. Are you ready to do your part, recruit?"

There really was no other way to answer that. "Yes, Drill Instructor!"

Galen gave a small yelp and hiss of pain besides me. I resisted the urge to look over my shoulder, but the slight reflection from Bramante's visor showed all I needed to know. The Range Instructor was standing behind me now. DI Bramante hollered "You're under fire, Recruit Shepard! Your suit is compromised! What do you do?!"

My body tensed unconsciously awaiting the stabbing. It came at my left rear oblique, squeezed between the armor plates and ripping the A/X suit beneath. I bit my lip to hold back my cry as the wound burned and throbbed, spreading a warmth around it that slowly trickled down my back. Then the wound went frighteningly cool and numb.

I fumbled reaching for the repair and medical kits at my waist while the HUD kept flashing between annoying and glaringly obvious warnings: Suit Breach and Injury. More helpful, or distressing given your view, were the updates to the rapidly dropping internal suit temperature and oxygen levels.

DI Bramante saw my early mistakes and applied the pressure a bit more "Don't just stand there! Move, recruit! Move or fucking die!"

Ignoring his less than useful advice, I focused on my first step. Get a medigel application on the wound.

The military grade medigel injectors were strong syringes meant to be able to pierce the thick and strong layers of our uniforms, but in

this case that was unneeded given there was already a hole. Holding the syringe with my right hand, I reached behind myself to feel for the puncture with the fingers of my left. Swallowing back a roar of pain as my fingers found it, I used them to gently pry open the plates enough where I could jam the syringe into the wound site. I hissed again as the needle pierced the traumatized flesh and the automatic plunger expelled the healing salve.

Tossing the spent syringe to the floor, I reached for the omnigel solution injector. I snapped the primer portion, activating the nanites within and mixing them with the omnigel solution. Undoing the cap, I repeated my process from before, jamming the nozzle into the tear of my undersuit and letting the automatic injector coat the location in the molten mixture. The nanites would use the compounds within the omnigel to form a field expedient patch in a matter of seconds.

After a moment the alerts ceased and the suit integrity stabilized. The HUD showed I had a little under fifty minutes of air and my inner temperature had balanced out to about eight degrees. Chilly, but not life threatening.

I drew in deep gulps of breath and repeatedly clenched and flexed my hands as I calmed down, exhilarated that I seemed to have passed my eval. My heart was still pounding ferociously in my chest and I couldn't shake the tingles of adrenaline that still surged through my body.

DI Bramante lingered in front of me for a moment longer before moving down the line, checking on all of the recruits in my squad.

The Range Instructor was making his way down the line, scanning us with his omnitool. When he finally scanned me, he shut his omnitool off and addressed us "Congratulations, recruits. You will not be dying from exposure."

I breathed a massive sigh of relief and immediately regretted it. The injury to my abs was still tender and probably wouldn't be healed for a couple of hours or tomorrow at best. Turning my head to look, the rest of my squad looked just as worse for wear, all standing gingerly and exhausted. But hey, at least we passed, right?

"You're all going to need to work on that reaction time. If these were injuries caused by the enemy then the bad guys would be using your eye sockets to fuck your skulls." The calm, matter of fact way the range instructor casually discussed our corpses being defiled was jarring, to say the least. It seems every time I thought these people couldn't find new heights, or lows, for their insults they managed to surprise me. Still, if he knew the effect his words had the he didn't show it, remaining all business. "We're done here. Collect your spent kits and file out of my decon chamber, recruits."

* * *

><p>UNSC Training Facility Thirteen, Highland Mountains
Military Training Grounds, Vierry Territory, Reach, Epsilon Eridani,
Orior Cluster; October 16th, 2572 [Standardized Earth Calendar], 1239
[Local Time, Terran Standard]

"You're sure you don't need anything?"

My grandmother's worrying was genuine but I could detect a hint of guilt through the vid chat no matter how much I told her it was fine. No one in their right mind would travel from Bekenstein to the hinterlands of Reach for a short non-ceremony graduation.

Reassuring her with a smile, I replied "Nothing, Abuela. I'm headed to Earth next for more training."

She perked up a bit at that, smiling and inquiring "Oh? Whereabouts? Maybe we'll come and visit you there?"

Now that I wasn't sure of. My reassignment orders had me headed to Russia back on Earth. Honestly, I was a bit excited because this would be my first trip to the 'Homeworld.'

I shrugged and grinned, "I don't have the slightest clue, actually. Somewhere in Russia. All I know it's called UNSC Tango Foxtrot Three and my transport leaves at zero three hundred tonight."

Her eyes narrowed into a humorous squint, "Zero hundred what? I'm sorry but I don't speak UNSC. The only tango this old lady knows is dancing."

Chuckling to hide my embarrassment, my hand raised raised to instinctively to rub the back of my neck but I caught myself. The medical staff had insisted that we refrain from playing with our new neural implants until they fully healed and could be calibrated. But more importantly I knew my Abuela's stance on the myriad of enhancements UNSC personnel received. Her biggest fear was that my biotic status would result in being a guinea pig.

Grinning and trying to charm my way past her defenses, I apologized for my wording "Sorry, Abuela. Training Facility Three and three in the morning Reach time."

Even across thousands of light years and through a vid chat on my datapad she detected my bullshit. She eyed my hand movement suspiciously before gazing at me for a moment to see if I would break. Time to see if four months of practice at holding in my emotions could stand the scrutiny of this test.

A beat of silence passed between us but when I didn't crack she slowly nodded. Her cool features melted into a bright smile, "So are you going to be one of those military types that uses acronyms and jargon for everything?" Her eyes and smile became mirthful as her teasing carried on, "Should I invest in translation software to speak with my own grandson?"

This time my grin was laid back and natural, "No, Ma'am. I'll make sure to avoid those terms when talking with you."

Her eyes widened and she giggled "Ma'am?" She pantomimed exaggerated shock and needled me more, "I might have to change my opinion on the UNSC if they're done the impossible and taught you manners." She settled back and eyed me critically but with an approving glint, "Maybe you're going to turn those good looks into being one of those smooth ladykillers? Most women can't resist a man in uniform."

I shrunk back on myself and felt my face grow warm at her praise and

suggestion. She held her sly grin a bit longer before her shoulders began to shake. Giggles burst from her lips which turned into an unrestrained cackle when she couldn't keep pretenses up anymore. My bashfulness turned into humiliation once it dawned on me that she was laughing at the idea of me being a casanova. Sure it was a ridiculous notion, but the fact my grandmother thought I was a hopeless case with women didn't exactly instill me with warm and fuzzy feelings. I rolled my eyes and let her have her fun. Experience had taught me that despite her polished veneer and poise it was clear where my mother and Ari had inherited their humor and spirit from.

Once her laughs had subsided and she could speak, she continued, "Well I suppose it could be worse. You could be one of those that injects vulgarities and profanity into everything you say." Her smile faltered as her own words sunk in. She frowned and looked over her shoulder, as if eyeing someone not in the room. "Like your dear sister."

Now it was my turn to laugh heartily. Imagining Ari verbally sparring with the instructors here was something I would pay good credits for. "Now that you mention it, she'd fit right in here."

"She doesn't need the encouragement." My Abuela's bitter tone and annoyance gave me the impression that Ari had done something recently to fuel her ire. But before I could ask what she'd done, Abuela had shifted gears with a smile, back on topic about Earth. "If you're going to be on Earth you really should try to find some time to visit some of the cities there. Moscow is lovely. The post Interplanetary War artwork and arcology architecture across the planet is really something to see in person."

I tilted my head and frowned, not sure she was getting the point that the only thing I'd be seeing are barracks. "I seriously doubt they're going to allow me to be a tourist, Abuela."

It was a nice thought, and from what I'd read and seen she was correct. Earth had come a long way since the devastation of the Interplanetary War. I shook my head at the ridiculous of the UNSC sending me to Earth to be a tourist but immediately regretted it. A sharp twinge of pain from my neural implant caused me to wince and hiss in pain. My grandmother's face caught on and became concerned. "What's wrong?"

Damn it. I just knew this vidchat would upset her. I should have waited until I was on the transport tomorrow. Suddenly irritable at my own mistake and the inevitable panic she would go into, I waved off her concern. "It's nothing. Just standard soreness from the surgery."

Her scowl returned in full force and she folded arms, transitioning from kind and loving Abuela to stern and intimidating Vivian Prieto. "And you're sure it's safe to have that implant and your bioamp?"

Once again drawing on my training to hold in my emotion I resisted the urge to rub my face with my hands and sigh in exasperation. "It's fine, Abuela. Honestly."

She glared at me, her nostrils flaring slightly before shaking her head and launching into a calm lecture, "We still barely understand

the complexities of how biotics interact with human physiology. The majority of that knowledge comes from adopting asari research, but they're natural biotics. Human biotics are lucky accidents. The UNSC shouldn't be so haphazard about piling cybernetics onto your nervous system."

"The UNSC isn't trying to kill me, Abuela." My mind thought back to all the dangerous training and the fact this entire profession revolved around violence that could potentially end my life.

Okay. Maybe I hadn't clarified myself. The UNSC wasn't trying to kill me this way.

She reacted harshly to my flippant dismissal of her concerns, becoming acerbic. "The UNSC doesn't care if you wind up on a coroner's table from fighting on some god forsaken backwater planet or because your implants fried your mind."

Now I was getting a bit ticked off. This is the same argument I had with her, with Lizzy, and who the fuck knows how many times with Abuelo. "It's done. I'm in the UNSC now, Abuela."

"You're as stubborn as your grandfather." She deflated in the face of logic and reality, resigned to me following her advice and finding my own path in life. "It's no wonder the two of you clash so much."

"Yeah, well, I'm better looking." I struck a ridiculous pose in an attempt to defuse the tension. Her reaction was to stare at me disbelievingly causing me to become self conscious "...what?"

She raised an eyebrow and eyed me critically, adopting a snobbish look "Are you certain? You sound quite confident for someone who is clearly in the one place on Reach devoid of mirrors."

Ouch. I was not expecting that. "What's that supposed to mean?"

She replied in a condescending, almost pitying way "The human race has gone to absurd lengths to prevent balding. You, however, seem to think it's a fashion statement."

"They make all of us shave it off." I rubbed my freshly cut short hair, defensive at her comment. "Shouldn't you be all kind and supportive? Say nice things to me?"

Failing to maintain the charade she broke into mischievous smile "The nice thing to tell you is that you look like you got into a tussle with a barber drone. And lost."

"Whatever." That was twice now she had cracked on my looks in some way.

Her smile became a delighted grin as she sensed she had broken my resolve "My, how quickly you lose that charm."

"Is that Luis?" My youngest sister's loud voice and footsteps came from somewhere off screen.

Abuela smiled, looking over her shoulder and patting the open spot on the couch. "Yes, it's your brother. Come and say hello."

Ari appeared from the left as a blur that hopped over the back of the couch. She came to a stop with a bounce in the seat and her wavy ponytail carrying momentum... right into Abuela's face.

She stared at her grandchild in shocked outrage. "What have I told you about that? This is not a gymnasium."

Ari blithely ignored her, instead giving me a large smile and exaggerated wave, "Hey, dumbaaaaaaaaa..." Her exuberance waned and trailed off with the greeting. She stared at me, perplexed by what she saw. "What the hell did you do to your hair?"

My own joy at seeing my baby sister died with her comment. "It's shaved, genius."

Not missing a beat she snarkily replied, "It looks terrible, dumbass. Was your head always shaped like that?"

Abuela tried to cover her snort with a fake cough but no one believed it for a second. Ari was still giving me a confused look, unsure why I would shave my head "Why would you do that? I mean, you were always ugly, but now you're not even trying to hide it."

Oh hell no. My temper started flaring and Abuela, sensing an imminent meltdown, intervened by lightly slapping Ari upside the head. "Araceli!"

My sister recoiled and rubbed the side of her head. She stared at Abuela accusingly and protested her innocence "What? He knows I'm playing."

Abuela leveled her with a fierce gaze and made it abundantly clear she was not amused. "You know what."

Ari pouted and sighed before sitting up straight. She smiled at me robotically and intoned with a sickly sweet voice, "Hi, brother. How are you? I miss you. It's boring here. Now they pick on me."

Shaking her head and coolly gazing at Ari, Abuela was clearly exasperated with her antics. "I'm not sure if we should be looking into a university or obedience school for you."

My sister dropped the act and looked at Abuela curiously "Are you still made about that lady?"

Abuela response at her grandchild's remark was to to be visibly thunderstruck. She recovered and delivered a vehement reprimand "That woman is the Systems Alliance Director for Biotic Research. For someone who professes a desire to pursue an education and career in that field you're off to a magnificent start. Stunning, actually. Running your mouth off like a child is a sure fire way to make a great impression."

Unfazed by the reprimand, Ari nodded as if something Abuela had said proved a point. "Yeah. You're still mad."

Now I was in the unenviable position of trying to prevent a meltdown between family members. And a small part of me desperately wanted to know what Ari had done, but asking that would probably only increase

the tensions.

Oh, who am I kidding. "What happened?"

"Nothing." Ari's reply was curt. She shrugged her shoulders and remained nonchalant but her eyes gave her away. Busted. I know my baby sister well enough to recognize her attempt to ignore her own guilt.

Abuela took a deep breath and pinched the bridge of her nose. Once sufficiently calm she explained just what had happened. "Your Grandfather and I made the mistake of bringing Araceli with us to the Milgrom Museum of Art's Annual Gala. Thought it would be good for her to absorb culture and socialize with people outside of her peer group." Abuela sagged in her seat and glared at Ari, who grunted and looked away with folded arms. "Your sister failed to conduct herself with comportment and decorum in a civilized setting with predictable results."

Ari chimed in, as if Abuela had missed an important detail. "That woman is a bitch and I told her so."

Oh, Ari. That certainly explains the comment earlier about using foul language. And Ari had done this at one of those big Bekenstein parties? To some big wig in the Systems Alliance? The people that attended these parties were the ultra competitive and ambitious types that lived to use every advantage they could find. No doubt people were lining up to make sure my grandparents remembered this faux pas.

Abuela laid into Ari, incensed by her continued nonchalance "That is it. I have told you far too many times. It is not necessary that you like everyone you meet but you will learn to think and apply your talents to achieve your goals. It is unacceptable for anyone but a small child to lash out and throw tantrums."

After my grandmother's spirited rebuke both women simmered in silence that became awkward for me. As much fun as it would be to taunt Ari for her public blunder and the lambasting I had just witnessed... I couldn't do it. I knew her and just like Abuela's outburst, Ari rarely went all in on something like that unless she felt strongly about it. That she still looked defiant and genuinely upset piqued my interest. Clearing my throat to get their attention, I voiced that curiosity. "So, uh, what did this lady do that pissed you off so much?"

"Haven't you seen the news?" When I shook my head she sighed and glowered, "She works for the Ministry of Transhuman Studies. Her office just approved funding for research into seeing if human biotics are dangerous because they're prone to aggression and violence. Some bullshit about it being for public safety."

"What? Are you kidding me?" To say I was stunned was an understatement. I mean, I knew people feared and hated biotics. I frowned as I remembered how Ilyse's reaction had been a painful reminder in that regard. But human biotics were rare. So rare that most people had never actually met one and only knew about us from the news. Biotic extremists terrorizing others. Criminals who used their gifts to facilitate a life of crime. Or biotics in uniform who were only ever shown when the UNSC was being blamed for excessive

force against civilians.

"Like I said. Bitch." Ari continued to glower and I fully agreed with her now. This woman got off easy just being called a bitch.

Taking a deep steadying breath Abuela calmly explained "As I told your sister, it's not that simple. This woman is under pressure. Terra Firma is using fear mongering and divisive politics to gain influence and it's working. They now hold enough votes to muddy the political system and they're using it to force concessions. Her ministry is one of those they're targeting for reduced funding so she has been coerced to approve this study in an attempt to placate them."

Abuela turned her head back to a defiant Ari and threw another dig in at her handling of the situation. "And that is how an adult handles a situation like this. You don't always get your way but you work with what you have to make the best out of a situation. Otherwise you're left with nothing."

The conversation drifted into a pause as Ari and I absorbed Abuela's advice in silence. I idly ran my finger along the edge of the datapad and was lost in my internal musings. This woman's best of that situation had thrown biotics out of the airlock. It kind of made me think more about my future once I left the military. Sergeant Muhavi had advised me to get a start on my education the moment I left MVC but I had yet to even consider what focus I would pursue. And now, with the reality of biotic bigotry staring me in the face, I had to wonder how that would figure into my plans. I could almost begin to sympathize with Lizzy's fear of being labeled a biotic now. Being one might close more doors than it opened.

Well, unless I made the UNSC a career. I snorted at that assumption. I was not here for the long haul. Eight years and done.

With my earpieces in and set to filter out all noise so I could focus on hearing the vidchat I was deaf to the world around me. And that's how Anna snuck up and swiftly kicked me in my outstretched leg.

Scowling up at her grinning visage, I popped out an earpiece and snarled, careful not to say anything my Abuela might chastise me for. "You better have a good reason why you did that, Vasilyeva."

"Maybe I just tripped over those big feet of yours." Anna teased me as she tended to do.

"Who's that?" Ari's inquisitive voice echoed in the earpiece I still had in. I glanced down and she was wildly trying to look around the the screen to get a peripheral view of whoever was talking to me. "Is that a girl?"

I rolled my eyes and looked back at Anna to see her paying attention to the screen of my datapad. Feeling like a bit of my privacy was being invaded, I moved the datapad out of her view "So what did you need?"

She grinned at my antics and stared at me in a way that made me feel uncomfortable. After an awkward moment she realized she was being weird and cleared her throat, "Oh. Uh, First Sergeant wants you."

I nodded, realizing that since our omnitools had yet to be returned to us then it made sense that the First Sergeant had used the intercom system in the barracks to look for me. Anna remained standing there, having already passed along the message but waiting around for no reason. And giving me a weird stare again. Feeling self conscious I stood and gathered my datapad "Okay, thanks."

"Who is that? Your girlfriend?" Ari's voice sounded loud in the uneasy quiet. Too loud.

I glanced at Anna to see if she had heard but judging by her curious stare she hadn't. I quickly, and nervously, refuted Ari's claim "No."

Anna's eyebrows raised even higher at my odd behavior. Ari's voice continued needling me. "Are you bluuuuuuuushing?"

My face did feel warm but that was just because I was annoyed and embarrassed by her making a scene. Anna continued to watch me, clearly enjoying the show. I growled out my response, "Shut. Up."

"I take you have to go?" My grandmother saved me from further ridicule but the sound of her voice made it clear she was enjoying the moment just as much as anyone.

Lifting the datapad so I could respond, I nodded. "Yeah. My First Sergeant wants to see me."

Ari smiled brightly and asked "Was the Second Sergeant unavailable?"

I glared at her attempt at military humor but Abuela had a better idea. She gently rapped Ari upside the head yet again "Say goodbye before I do it again."

She huffed and slid away from Abuela before becoming chirpy and annoying "Toodles, dumbass. Sorry about the tragic accident that removed your hair but I'm sure your girlfriend loves it."

Before my Abuela could react Ari had bounded out of her seat with a giggle and ran away. Abuela's head tracked her movements as she yelled at her retreating back "I said no running in the house!" Sighing and turning back to me, she gave me a large and warm smile conveying her love. "We love you, mijo. I'll tell everyone you said hi but you're going to send everyone some mail yourself. Don't pretend you don't know how to. And let us know as soon as possible where you're going to be at in Russia."

My face grew warm yet again as I was pleased to feel the love and affection but aware of Anna standing nearby and being an interloper. Somewhere in the distance, Ari's excited voice yelled "We're going to Earth?"

Abuela didn't miss a beat as the smile slid off her face and her voice lost it's warmth. Not even bothering to turn around, she activated her omnitool, punching in a command and yelled "You're not going anywhere once I get my hands on you. You do realize I have the ability to control everything in the house? Including your omnitool?"

"Shit." Ari's reply was more faint but between that and Abuela's smug satisfaction I assume that she had just shut down her extranet connection and household privileges. Ari could run, but she couldn't hide.

"ByeAbuelaLoveYou." I tried not to mutter the words together but with Anna standing nearby I had no idea how she would mock me for being so sentimental. The connection was terminated and I shut off the datapad. Removing the other earpiece, I tucked them both alongside the collapsed datapad in a pocket. Clearing my throat I nodded to Anna, trying to fill the silence between us. "So do you know what he wants?"

Anna shook her head, "Nope." Gesturing towards the pocket that held my datapad she smiled and inquired "That your family?"

I grimaced and wondered how much of that she had heard or inferred. "Yeah. My sister and grandmother."

Anna's grin was a bit softer this time. She gave me a once over before holding my gaze. I looked away, nervous for some reason, and she chuckled slightly, "Good looking family."

"Uh, thanks." How else was I supposed to respond to that? If I didn't know any better, Anna was... no. That was crazy. She just liked playing with me like she did with everyone.

Sensing my unease, she cleared her throat and tilted her head in the direction of the staff offices on the ground floor of the barracks. "Well, you better get going. If he thinks you made him wait you're going to be in trouble."

I nodded and started walking that way. Why did he want to see me? DI Bramante was conducting exit interviews with us all today so it wasn't that. Maybe something to do with my biotics?

The hallway leading to the offices was a dimly lit plain concrete and metal corridor. Between the six doorways leading to the offices and living quarters of the company staff were decorations of the unit's history. Plaques, awards, holos and other military memorabilia going back at least a century and a half of training the warriors of humanity.

The memory of my one and only time coming down here caused me to grimace as I passed the door to DI Bramante's office. Note to future self. Automatic doors had sensors that detected your movement or credentials to open as you approached. But not quick enough to prevent you from smashing into them face first when sprinting to the latrine. I unconsciously rubbed the small contusion beneath my left eyebrow. The only reminder left of the gash that had split open and bled everywhere on the floor of DI Bramante's office while he berated me for behaving like a toddler.

Coming to a stop at the final office on the left side of the hallway I felt the trepidation build at having a private conversation with the First Sergeant. Granted I'd had more contact with him than anyone else in my platoon given my biotic training sessions, but that was never alone. And he never said much to any of us beyond explaining things and correcting our mistakes. So I had no clue what he would

want besides to give some final words about biotic training in the military. It was either that or let my mind speculate wildly in the absence of fact. Like, oh, I don't know. Maybe I had to repeat UCMT?

Realizing I had been standing here for nearly a minute I cleared my throat and tapped the haptic display for the lock, "Recruit Shepard requesting permission to enter."

I brushed lint and dust off of my uniform while I waited. A moment later the red haptic display turned green and his voice confirmed "Permission granted."

The door opened and I entered the office where immediately my eyes took in the sights. It was the same dull and unimpressive mix of regular construction and prefabricated materials like the rest of the building. But like DI Bramante's office and the hallway outside, First Sergeant had added his own flair to the room. It was still sparsely decorated and very military in it's organization but there was enough interesting history to draw my attention in multiple directions.

He sat behind a small metal desk in the center of the room typing away into a terminal. I came to a stop in front of the desk and stood at attention, ram rod straight but eyeing the room around me. On the wall behind him was a large holo of a younger First Sergeant Yilmaz with several men and women. They were bruised, bloodied, filthy and clad in the iconic black armor of the UNSC special forces. To the left was a small bookcase with real books and several odd trinkets. Souvenirs, perhaps? On the right wall were a handful of exotic weapons mounted on plaques like trophies.

"At ease, recruit." My eyes jerked back forward to see he hadn't even bothered to look up from his typing when addressing me. Maybe this wasn't too important if he wasn't giving it his full attention? Relaxing my posture I resumed my observations of the office by looking more closely at the weapons on the right.

The most eye catching piece was a large ornate warhammer nearly three meters long. It's head was a massive flat surface. On the reverse end of the head was a long vicious looking blade not unlike old bardiche polearms that humans used thousands of years ago. From what I remembered these sort of weapons were wielded by the much larger Krogan or Jiralhanae. It served to make their fearsome size and strength even more frightening. I'd seen vids and holos on the extranet of those unlucky enough to be caught on the receiving end of weapons like this. You were lucky if they could identify what was left of your corpse without resorting to DNA identification.

All the rest of the mounted weapons were things I had seen before on the extranet. Asari fist claws. Vintage Turian assault rifle dating back to Krogan Rebellion.

My mouth went dry as I noticed a black and blue rifle that still haunted my dreams. A Batarian Kishock. The harpoon rifle. The same model that the two Batarians had wielded near the canals behind our family orchards.

I forced my vision away from that reminder of a horrible time in my life. Looking for something else to occupy my mind I was drawn to a

small and odd piece mounted in the center of the wall like it was the prize piece of this collection. It consisted entirely of a what appeared to be a curved hilt with large knobs mounted on either end. The middle of the grip had an small protrusion that would make holding the weapon difficult. Constructed out of a purple and gray hued metal that had a high almost iridescent sheen with intricate etchings, the weapon looked to be carved from the shell of a large insect by an artist.

"It's a Covenant plasma sword." His voice startled me before my mind caught what he said. My eyes widened once I fully understood his explanation. You only ever saw the bright white blades it produced in holos or vids. Mostly because Covenant Sangheili warriors were the only ones to wield them and when they did, those nearby rarely lived to tell the tale. One of the most infamous vids on the extranet was security footage from Harvest showing a single Sangheili charging a YMIR mech down like a berserker warrior and slicing it to ribbons in a matter of seconds. The thick composite armor and solid metal parts might as well have been melted butter.

I was curious how he had come into possession of one of these weapons. Covenant technology, particularly their weaponry, was notoriously fickle. From what I knew they all had a built in safety mechanism that caused them to self destruct or become inoperable if any attempt to handle or reverse engineer them was made. Often with very nasty results. All across the galaxy people learned, and learned quickly, that it was better to leave the weapons of fallen Covenant soldiers where they lay.

"Had lunch yet, recruit?"

I frowned at his concern. He asked me here to see if I had eaten? What? Was he going to go all motherly on me and tell me I needed to eat more? My frown became more pronounced as I recalled he always seemed to provide energy bars and reminded us to eat more after every biotic training session. "No, First Sergeant. I was sitting outside talking to my relatives when recruit Vasilyeva informed me that you wanted to see me."

He leaned back in his seat, drumming the fingers of his right hand on the edge of the table and giving me an annoyed glare "I didn't ask for a sonnet, recruit. Keep it simple. A yes or no will suffice."

He sighed as I kept my emotions in check, trying to avoid showing him how much his remark stung. Reaching forward he grabbed a datapad off his table and began perusing it's contents "I'll be conducting your exit interview. Normally, this is the responsibility of your Drill Instructor but circumstances beyond any of our control warrants my expertise on this matter."

Circumstances beyond any of our control? What did that mean? Was I in some sort of trouble? I remained motionless and kept my face blank but internally my mind was reeling with panic.

First Sergeant Yilmaz looked up from the datapad to scrutinize my silence. I made sure not have eye contact with him while he continued to stare me down "Are you aware of the N Series MVC, recruit?"

My eyes involuntarily jerked to the holo of him and his comrades. ODS'Ts. I nodded and cleared my throat "Special forces, First

Sergeant."

He spun slightly in his chair to look at the holo of himself and his peers. First Sergeant stared at it in contemplation before continuing. "Orbital Drop Shock Troopers. Feet first into hell. A Turian general gave the N series that name on Shanxi. His report stated that the first wave of the human offensive were ferocious and highly skilled warriors. Shock troopers dropped from orbit." He swung his seat back so he faced me again with another piercing gaze. "It's an honor even to be selected for ICT."

What was ICT? I'd never heard of that acronym before. And why was he telling about this? I thought this was my exit interview?

Seeing the confusion in my eyes he clarified "Interplanetary Combatives Training. The N series school."

Oh. Well that makes sense. I still didn't have the faintest idea why any of this was relevant to me. There was no way in hell I was going to be asked to attend special forces training. Ever. Unless this was about him being bored and wanting someone to listen to him ramble on about his glory days.

He stood and walked around the desk, folding his arms in an attempt to intimidate me. A successful attempt, at that, because his invading my personal space and glaring left me feeling nervous. "It's standard procedure that the staff at UCMT observe recruits for exceptional promise. Those that should reclassify their MVC or attend additional schools. Future officers. Pilots. Engineers. Intelligence. Special forces. Each biotic recruit is to be given special consideration to determine if they have a future in the N series where their gifts could be put to use."

Now I was really confused. This had to be a joke, right? I had trouble passing UCMT. The thought of me, of all people, being an ODS made me want to laugh. But he wasn't laughing. Not even a smirk. And that really scared me. "I gave my recommendation to Captain Cho nearly a month ago that she classify you as unfit for acceptance into ICT. Someone at Arcturus was of a different opinion. They made the call that we reassess your potential. I have never even heard of that happening before."

That the UNSC special forces were interested in biotics wasn't that shocking but I had to agree with his decision. I wasn't cut out for the N series. So why would someone be interested in pushing me towards that?

His voice dropped to a growl as the simmering rage he held in check was becoming apparent. "I don't take kindly to people in cushy offices back on Arcturus telling me how to do my job. To make sure I knew what I was doing. And I'm really not fond of those same haptic pushers trying to get an unprepared recruit into a prestigious and important school based on some micromanaging politics."

I involuntarily shrank back at the way he made his opinion clear. If he wasn't pleased with what was happening then I was even less so with being the one to take the brunt of his ire. I didn't ask for this. It wasn't my fault. Behind the fear and confusion a small bit of my pride and indignation were beginning to stir.

"I've seen your kind a thousand times before, recruit. One and done. Do just enough to get by, coast through your enlistment and then leave the UNSC. I normally don't have a problem with your type because you fill out a uniform in service of the human race. That's a lot more than most humans can say and I appreciate your time and sacrifice. But ICT and N series requires dedication. Desire. Ambition. It's commitment to a career and a way of life." His words were strong and contemptuous. As if my very existence offended him somehow. I wanted to slink away and leave with whatever was left of my pride intact. But that tattered pride was starting to roar with indignation and urging me to rage back. To prove him wrong. I wasn't just some slacker passing through life.

My thoughts wandered back to the conversation I had just finished with Ari and Abuela. Biotics were just tools to others. Someone to blame. Someone to use as an attack dog. Someone to profit off of. It looked like those realities extended to the military as well.

He continued to glare at me as I scowled back. After a moment he picked up the datapad again and sighed letting all his anger leave him. Leaning back against his desk he continued in a more calm manner. "Most recruits are never ready for the reality of the politics involved with being part of a military force defending human and Council interests across the galaxy. It's never as simple of pointing weapons and killing the bad guy. And being a biotic is another layer to navigate. It can be tough. Trust me. I know." His stare softened and he seemed to be willing to impart a bit of wisdom to me. "Because you're a biotic you're always going to have to be better than your peers. Do twice the work for half the credit. Have your every flaw and mistake magnified under some analyst's holotank. That's going to happen no matter if you stay in the UNSC or leave the service for life as a civilian. Everything I see on this datapad says you have incredible potential should you choose to stay in the UNSC. I can appreciate, theoretically, why they want you so bad. But my own observations, and the observations of your Drill Instructor, tell a different story. You are not ready. You don't have the mindset to fulfill that potential and excel in the military. So I am recommending, for the second time, that you are not N series material. Now comes the hard part."

He tossed the datapad back onto the desk and resumed folding his arms "I know from experience that they're not going to stop trying, recruit. SpecWar loves biotics, but not this much. I called in some favors and found out why, specifically, they're so interested in you." His shoulders sagged slightly and he shook his head. "I can't tell you specifics for security reasons and even if I could, I wouldn't. Do you want to know why?"

I had to resist the urge to blurt out 'I have no fucking clue.'

Was this some sort of mind game? He just told me that I flat out sucked. Did he want me to say it out loud? That I was terrible? Well fuck that. He wouldn't get the satisfaction. My reply was an effort in control to keep the sarcasm out of my voice. "Because I'm not ready, First Sergeant."

Something in the way I responded made him slowly nod. Almost pleased. He hummed at what he saw and spoke more like the times he had been educating during a biotic lesson "Currently? Absolutely not. But I saw their true reason for being persistent. It's an eventuality that

they are going to get their way and put you in ICT. That leaves me with two choices. I could forget all my training about being proactive towards a situation and throw a tantrum over your being accepted as you are. Or I could do my job, as a veteran N series and your instructor, to begin molding you. Preparing you. Motivate you and point you in the right direction. So my question stands. Do you want know why they want you?"

My curiosity flared at his question. In that instant I knew that this had been his entire goal for this meeting. He knew they were going to keep trying so he tore me down to face reality and then offered me a way to be worthy of attending. Something to focus on. A mystery to solve. I nodded and stood straighter. "Yes, First Sergeant."

He scrutinized me yet again and nodded "Good. Then earn it. Bust your ass to live up to the potential in your file." He fished into his pants pocket and withdrew my omnitool. Tossing it to me he carried on with his instructions. "I mean it, recruit. If you want to know you're going to have to take the hard path and earn it. Live up to the honor of attending ICT and wearing the helljumper badge. That means you are headed to Earth with a new mindset. You will put in effort to be the top of every eval and test at your MVC training. When you get to your first duty station it's not time to go out drinking and partying with your fellow marines every chance you get. Your priority will be to ask what certifications and classes are available to you. Spend your spare time improving your biotic skill. Find the certified hand to hand instructor for your duty station. Live in the gym. Ask people with different MVCs to teach you a bit about their jobs. Are you planning on getting an education outside of the UNSC?"

"Yes, First Sergeant. My recruiter gave me information on the University of Illyria." As the words left my mouth I suddenly remembered the flag on my medical records. How Sergeant Muhavi had been mystified and then awed by what it meant. She said it was something serious. Could that be related to what is happening now?

Before I could think to ask he finished our interview. "Good. Square that away as soon as possible, recruit. Your graduation from UCMT is approved and you are to report to the Dodola orbital station for transport to UNSC Tango Foxtrot Three. Dismissed and remember you make your own luck, Recruit Shepard."

I spun on my heel and exited in the military manner I had been drilled in. Once alone in the hallway I placed my omnitool on my wrist, still dazed by the overwhelming amount of information I just received. My head was swimming with possibilities and things I needed to do.

So lost in my thoughts that when I wandered back to the courtyard outside I didn't see Anna waiting for me. She hollered and beckoned me over with a smile, but slowly frowned upon seeing my expression. "Hey. Everything okay? What did he want?"

I blinked and wondered how to answer that. There was so much personal information and most of it was hard to comprehend. I didn't feel like lying to her but I wasn't sure if I should be talking about any of this. Rubbing the back of my neck I opted for half truths. "Biotic stuff. Told me I'd have to work hard to prove myself."

She nodded and was awkwardly silent for a moment, unsure of how to contribute much to the conversation on biotics. Glancing at the omnitool on my wrist she grinned and spoke about that "You got your omnitool back? Let's exchange mail addy's so we can keep in touch."

My eyebrows raised at her eagerness but I shrugged. It wouldn't hurt to stay in touch with the people I trained with. I mean, I had yet to delete Auggie's information. Not like anyone could be much worse than that. We synced our omnitools and talked about how much sleep we were hoping to get on the transports to our MVC schools. Somehow I figured I wouldn't be getting much now that I had something new to gnaw at my consciousness.

* * *

><p>Codex Entry: Kinetic Barrier

Kinetic barrier generation, or 'shielding', is the premiere defense technology of the galaxy. Capable of absorbing the energy and deflecting the mass of incoming threats it is used in various functions aside from military applications such as defending satellites, tether elevators, space stations, and civilian vessels from debris.

Barrier power is dependent upon the strength and sophistication of it's capacitors, element zero cores, and emitters. The primary objective of a barrier system is to utilize the shielding as a means of deflection which protects the vehicle, station, or armor system entirely. To this end it will analyze the surroundings to calculate angles and trajectories to best fire emitters. If that is not possible, which is often the case, the system will attempt to rob the incoming threat of as much kinetic energy as possible to render it harmless relative to the strength of the physical armor plating.

The system consists of a dedicated barrier VI controlling a primary power source linked to supercapacitors and networks of sensory modules, small element zero cores, and high powered emitters. The primary power source charges the supercapacitors that then prime the system for use. Sensors work constantly to identify threats moving at dangerous velocities such as debris, fragmentation, mass accelerator projectiles, and groupings of charged particles. The system VI even analyzes and interprets enemy weaponry and behavior to anticipate threats. When a threat is identified, the VI activates the supercapacitors to discharge an appropriate portion of their power into element zero cores and emitters in corresponding sections expected to be hit. An increased mass effect field is created and shaped by the emitter as a short duration barrier which is ended when the VI detects that the threat has passed.

The entire process, from target acquisition to field collapse, can last less than [Human Translation: One Terran second]. This is done to prevent excessive power consumption and avoid accidental triggering that hinders user activity. In practice the technology and it's application is geared towards being fool proof and reliable under all conditions as experimental and specialized systems can spell disaster at a moments notice. In combat, with mass accelerated projectiles and high velocity debris appearing unexpectedly at relatively close range, the reaction time for the VI to identify or

anticipate threats is at a premium. It must gauge the potential risk of all threats in conjunction with the behavior of the vehicle pilot or armor wielding soldier to make the best decisions possible.

Capacitors are drained routinely and must wait between periods of use to be recharged by the primary power source. In this span of time a capacitor can be depleted entirely, leaving the shielding inert in the face of continued onslaught. This period is often referred to as a recharging gap.

Attempts to create redundant systems as fail safes in the event of system failure or recharging gap have met with little success or become too expensive and cumbersome. Element zero cores can not be linked to multiple emitters without interference resulting in short circuiting at best, and catastrophic mass effect field detonations at worst. This requires redundant element zero cores, which drastically increases the price. The best hope for increased duration and power of shielding rests in increasingly powerful supercapacitors, rapid recharging technology, more durable emitters, and multiple capacitors systems.

Shield technology is in a constant state of development as it is the primary defense against mass accelerators. In this arms race the researchers and scientists of government agencies and defense industries are tasked with creating new and improved systems that can work quickly, reliably, and tirelessly to protect against a myriad of threats and techniques designed to overcome it's weaknesses.

The most common method to overwhelm shielding is brute force. This is achieved in a variety of ways, such as relentless automatic fire or single powerful shots. When used correctly these methods will quickly drain capacitors until the recharging gap is reached leaving the vehicle or armor reliant upon physical plating as the sole defense. Another aspect is to continually target specific locations in order to force individual emitters to work continuously resulting in permanent degradation and potential failure.

Another such method is using charged particles and mass effect fields. The dense nature of an increased mass effect field offers minimal protection against directed energy weapons. The charged particles interact strongly with the field and collapse it prematurely allowing safe passage for the associated projectile. Weaponized mass effect fields are used in warheads to counteract the fields used by the kinetic barrier, often resulting in mass effect field detonations and a temporary 'hole' in the shielding while the emitter is power cycled to prevent damage.

A final method is to use electronic warfare to fool sensors and hamper VI operation. This method is far more difficult as the majority of competent military and security forces use top of the line frequency agility hardware, encryption suites, and electronic countermeasure software and VIs to protect their communications networks. Should the attempt be successful the window of opportunity to take advantage is small as it is only a matter of seconds before forces are made aware of the attack and correct the issue.

The adoption of kinetic barriers has drastically increased the life expectancy of soldiers and vehicles on the battlefield as well as infrastructure and vessels in orbit or space subject to debris. This

should not be confused with the shielding benefiting or even condoning risky behavior. Barriers merely provide a layer of safety against surprise attacks and allow for appropriately aggressive combat. The lethality of modern combat ensures that kinetic barriers are not invincible and will not save against recklessness.

* * *

><p>Codex Entry: Mass Accelerators

Modern projectile weaponry is a product of mass effect fields and advanced VI programming allowing railgun technology to perform at levels previously unattainable. From larger mass acceleration cannons mounted on vessels and vehicles to hand held pistols and rifles wielded by infantry, the scale and breadth of mass accelerators is extensive.

The concept remains similar no matter the type or size of mass accelerator. Two metal rails are closely aligned parallel to one another. A projectile is loaded between the rails and encased in a lowered mass effect field. The field acts as an armature creating a circuit between the two rails. An electrical current is applied to one rail where it follows the path of this circuit through the mass effect field and into the other rail. This creates electrically driven magnetic fields in each rail and the mass effect field which act in unison to propel the projectile along the length of the rails where it is finally ejected.

While this type of weapon produces incredible velocities that transfers into powerful kinetic impacts there are significant considerations and drawbacks. Of most concern is that longer rails or increased current create more force propelling a projectile but also more heat and stronger magnetic fields. Different configurations are built around these concerns to create specialized mass accelerator weapons.

In order to produce magnetic fields that would create force viable for weapons use a considerable draw of electrical power is needed. Even with the lowered mass of a mass effect field this leads to a choice between accepting slower speeds to increase the number of firings or pouring that power into fewer powerful firings.

When the electrical current passes through the rails it encounters some resistance despite the conductivity of the metal. That resistance results in a thermal build up that can damage internal components and degrade performance unless it is managed properly with heat absorption and venting. It is standard practice for the weapon VI to override user operation so that it may vent heat should thermal build up reach critical levels. Frequent maintenance and replacement of damaged parts are a vital part of keeping these weapons in working order.

Because the weapon relies upon the magnetic fields produced to launch the projectile it also suffers recoil and repulsion effects from those very same fields that affect accuracy and potentially damage the rails. The stronger the fields, the more force that is applied to the projectile, recoil, and repulsion. This necessitates that weapons be balanced between maximizing firing potential and managing acceptable levels of recoil and repulsion.

These considerations make it possible to create a large assortment of mass accelerator weapons suited to specific tasks. Additionally there are many modular accessories that legally, and sometimes illegally, modify the weapons to give them greater tactical flexibility and increased performance. It should be noted that the Citadel Council and all Citadel Charter governments adhere to a strict policy of regulation and limitations on the sale, use, and modification of mass accelerators in regards to private ownership, military application, and importation of illegal models from outside of Citadel Space. Mass accelerators are classified into three primary weapons category based upon distinction in application and design.

Cannons, which fire large specially designed projectiles at top end velocities. These weapons are found primarily on vehicles, vessels, and facility defense turrets due to their size and power requirements. Usage of cannons is limited to military and authorized security forces as their destructive power is equivalent in ranges from high explosive charges to fission based nuclear devices.

Micro scale mass accelerators are the premiere category representing the most familiar and widespread types. They fire small projectiles shaved from an internal block of metal called an ammo block. Projectile size depends upon the weapon type, but typical sizes range from a large grain of sand to a small piece of gravel. Ammo blocks come in two universal sizes with each meant for specific weapons. Small ammo blocks are meant to be placed in any hand held weapon while larger ammo blocks are for use in larger weapons requiring turrets or housed on vehicles. Because of the wide range of variables available in configuration for micro scale mass accelerators these weapons have a diverse range of capabilities represented in the multitude of styles and designs. This includes pistols, rifles, machine guns, autocannons, and point defense guns.

Munitions launchers such as grenade launchers, missile launchers, shotguns, and flechette or bolt firing weapons are the third and final grouping. Mass accelerators fall under this category when they are micro scale but fire large or unconventional projectiles such as grenades, spikes, missiles, flechettes, clusters of metal shavings, and explosive charges. In comparison to more conventional mass accelerators, munitions launchers perform at much lower velocities and slower rates of fire due to the mass of the projectiles. This is compensated for by many of the projectiles having self guidance, explosive warheads, and high penetration value. This branch of mass accelerators is regarded as the most controversial and many such styled weapons skirt the boundaries of legality of military use or are outright banned in Citadel Space/

The future of mass accelerator weaponry is tied to kinetic barrier, armor plating, and exotic countermeasure technologies. These technologies serve as the primary defenses against mass accelerators by deflecting incoming strikes, absorbing kinetic energy, and attacking the sensors and VI automation that assists in mass accelerator accuracy. Kinetic barrier technology in particular thwarts the efficiency of mass accelerators so much that several types of weapons and modular accessories are built around the philosophy of stripping shielding quickly or bypassing them altogether. This arms race is always moving forward but sees significant increase during major conflicts and in the aftermath as military and security experts examine the lessons learned.

* * *

><p>Codex Entry: Misriah Armory M5 Series Assault Rifle

The M5 series assault rifle, commonly referred to as the Harrier, is a steadfast staple of human military and security forces. Misriah Armory introduced the rifle in [Human Translation: 2437 Terran Calendar] as a response to UNSC demands for a replacement primary automatic weapon to the aging M3 series. It was battle tested during the ensuing First Insurrection War and the overwhelmingly positive feedback has since transformed Misriah Armory from a second tier defense contractor to the primary supplier of arms and vehicles to the UNSC.

The M5 series has seen minor revisions resulting in four known models. The original M5A is still produced and sold to certified private security and law enforcement agencies as the M37, from it's initial nomenclature prior to official adoption by the UNSC and redesignation as the M5 series. The M5B still sees use in the UNSC military but has since ceased to be produced or be authorized for fabrication. The M5C is the current model issued to UNSC forces as the primary automatic rifle. A semiautomatic variant, the M5K Carbine, is used sparingly by UNSC forces which prefer the M392 Saber marksman rifle or M55 Argus battle rifle, both also produced by Misriah. The M5K does see tremendous sales among civilian colonists, law enforcement agencies, and private security forces as the M96 Mattock.

Slim and lightweight, the rifle series is built around the expectation of short ranged engagements in urban and interplanetary combat settings. Durable but light materials were chosen to give maximum strength against inhospitable environments and the usual wear and tear of combat. This reduced weight allows for the more robust internal heat management and repulsion/recoil systems which make the rifle exceptional in combat. M5 series operate on the principle of being able to sustain a rapid rate of high velocity fire. This allows the rifle to chew through kinetic barriers and armor plating with frightening speed in skilled hands. The advanced heat management gives way to the common human infantry tactic of advancing via bounding overwatch and withering suppressing fire.

Standard UNSC VI integration and electronics suites are housed above the receiver on the dorsal surface. Weapon and target status can be linked and displayed via the HUD in armor and headgear suites. Additionally the weapon can produce an unobtrusive tactical holographic display just above the electronics suite showing simple readouts as well as pop up sights for manual aiming.

A modular rail integration system runs the length of the barrel on the dorsal and ventral sides. This allows for the attachment and integration of advanced and secondary VI sensory and targeting systems as well as accessories such as the M301 munitions launcher or M788 omni-weapon field fabrication suite.

The primary drawback of the weapon is a consequence of it's excellent design. The rifle focuses on rate of fire and velocity over accuracy, making it a poor choice at mid to long range engagements. Rate of fire and top of the line heat management also serve to make it almost too efficient at depleting the ammo block. A skilled and experienced

combatant is able to send well over a two hundred shavings downrange in under [Human Translation: One Terran Minute] without engaging the automatic heat management override. The UNSC seeks to compensate for these shortcomings through training that reinforces combat awareness in recruits to understand the weapon's limitations. This training emphasizes the prioritization of targets within ranges that are conducive with maximizing the efficiency of the Harrier and using short controlled bursts in lieu of steady streams of automatic fire whenever possible.

Only the turian H53 Phaeston assault rifle produced by Armax Arsenal and asari K21 Khepesh assault rifle produced by Dione Nomarch Council rate as superior weapons in the class of automatic infantry assault rifles. The E27 Parang assault rifle produced by Folis Tega Armory for the Salarian Union is comparable in quality.

The M5 Harrier is not without it's detractors, who claim the success of the rifle series has more to do with Arcturus politics than actual battle field excellence. That Misriah Armory has a near complete grip on UNSC weapons production does not go unnoticed. Many assert that the UNSC and Systems Alliance reliance upon the defense contractor has lead to decisions being made over weapon systems that favor Misriah executives and shareholders than what actually benefits soldiers, marines, sailors, and airmen in the field.

* * *

><p>Codex Entry: Robotic Platforms

The ubiquitous nature of VI systems in modern society has fueled the industry of robotics. Individual robots are known as platforms, or more colloquially as Mechs if they are terrestrial or Drones if they are capable of movement in atmosphere or vacuum. These platforms come in a variety of models from the miniscule such as nanite swarm robots used in medicine and emergency repair to the massive teleoperated element zero mining mechs that can withstand proximity to a degenerate star.

Because of the overlap between robotics and VI systems there is strong demand for both increased capability and stronger safeguards. Robotics occupies a niche in augmenting society by performing maintenance and difficult tasks. This extends to working in environments that would be hostile to sapient life, augmenting military or defense capabilities, providing automation for menial work and manufacturing, medical treatment, or performing duties to help keep cities, facilities, and stations in working order.

VI systems are designed to these tasks with corresponding robotics platforms with further specialization. These platforms are typically cheap to manufacture and use, but that is not always the case. Most military, mining, telecommunications, and scientific robotic platforms are an order of magnitude more expensive because of a large amount of proprietary technologies and expensive materials.

Safety is an ever present concern regarding robotics platforms. With their impressive robotic capabilities, fast automation processing, and access to vital systems or weaponry, robotics platforms have the potential to be a great harm to the public. This threat is made possible by hostile VI programming, faulty or corrupted programming, and cyberwarfare.

To mitigate this threat, the Citadel Council and Citadel Charter governments insist upon security measures and policies that balance VIs and robotic platforms use with safety for the public. Additionally all mechs have robust defenses against cyberwarfare and encrypted access available to law enforcement in order to shut down malfunctioning or rogue robotics platforms. This access is sometimes highly criticized by public safety and robotic platform industry experts as being a loophole used in cyberwarfare that actually increase the risk of threats.

The robotic platform industry is a subset of the greater VI software industry. While VI automation is present in a great deal of products and services, the robotics platform industry focuses on creating paired VI and robotic platforms. Prominent manufacturers include Ktesibios Guild from Cyone, Jotun Heavy Industries from Mars, Nahru Combine from Irune, Automata Research from Digeris, Tentillum Mandate from Donon, and Elanus Risk Control Service from Noveria.

Areas outside of Citadel Space display an interesting diversity in application of robotic platforms and VI system technologies. On one end of the spectrum, both the Quarian Migrant Fleet and Covenant Empire have what appears to be a cultural aversion towards these technologies. Quarian recalcitrance can be considered reasonably justified given their tumultuous and sad history with intelligence programming and robotic platforms. The Quarian Genocide remains one of the starkest reminders in galactic history of the dangers of reckless technological advancement and the need for public policy that would prevent similar incidents in the future.

The Covenant Empire, however, displays an even more peculiar behavior. Since the first documented encounters with Citadel forces over a millennium ago [galactic years] the Covenant have shown no reliance upon intelligence programming and robotic platforms. The overarching Covenant societal structure and individual species cultures are still poorly understood leaving scholars and researchers baffled as to how Covenant technology by all measures is of a far more advanced nature than anything known to Citadel Space. The only conclusion possible is that there are some still unknown strong societal factors that prevents research or acceptance of intelligence programming and robotic platforms.

As a direct contrast are the all encompassing fabrication conglomerates Elkoss Combine and Sidimmah Gro'Bash that embody the piracy economy and unprincipled competitive ethos of the Terminus. While both entities produce their own lines of products they are equally renown, and reviled, across Citadel Space for producing cheap counterfeits of proprietary and well known technologies, including VI systems and robotic platforms. Their production rates fuel the smuggling industry as well as supply mercenary outfits, piracy groups, and Terminus warlords with material. This endears them to their clientele who take particular offense towards Citadel forces attempting to hinder or even shut down production.

While this frustrates the Citadel Council and Citadel Charter members, they take more concern in the cheap and unregulated nature of the Terminus marketplace. The VI and robotic platforms produced by Elkoss Combine or Sidimmah Gro'Bash can undercut Citadel Space models by avoiding a majority of the safety features demanded by law and using substandard quality control and materials. This results in the

majority of the Terminus relying upon VI systems and robotic platforms with tremendous flaws in security and safety that can be exploited. Unfortunately this has helped influence the spread of slavery as a cheaper and more reliable alternative to robotic platforms for hard labor.

Current analysis of VI and robotic platforms being fielded by the Batarian Hegemony military and security forces over the last decade has given rise to concern. Intelligence agencies across the galaxy are noting an increase in sophistication in both hardware and software that is rapidly gaining ground on traditional leaders in the industry across the galaxy. The most significant leap has been in their own intelligence operations which have made the already difficult task of penetrating Hegemony servers near impossible in recent years. This technological breakthrough is seen by many as a paranoid batarian response to perceived threats and preparation for war. A direct consequence of the growing tensions with the Systems Alliance along the Skyllian Verge border and Citadel Council colonization efforts in the Sigurd's Cradle star cluster.

11. Are We There Yet Interlude

****AN: Apologies. When this chapter was first uploaded I accidentally used an unedited and rough version that was pretty terrible to try and read.****

* * *

><p>[\ UNSC Records [A] UNSC Admin Mil [to]
*****Luis V Shepard 5923-LS-2826 [A] UNSC Marines
Mil***** \] [\ 2572-10-16 \]****

[\ The following message contains sensitive personnel records and is to be viewed only by the intended recipient

Issue of change of duty station/military entrance training phase one completion per pursuant to UNSC Order 178-B

Recruit Shepard, Luis Vincent [5923-LS-2826]

We would like to extend our congratulations on your approved status for completion of Unified Combined Military Training from [UNSC Training Facility Thirteen, Ninth Training Battalion, Echo Company]. Your next step will be to attend your MVC [Bravo Series Phase 1] training at [UNSC Training Facility Three]. A reservation in your name has been placed with the civilian transport agency flight [Spaceways Flight 7264] leaving [Dodola Orbital Station] at [0300, Local Time] on [2572-10-17]. Failure to comply with this order for movement will be dealt with to the full extent of UNSC Military Justice. If you have difficulty reaching your destination, please inform [\ UNSC Dispatch [A] UNSC CENTCOM01 \]

Per your completion your personnel records have been updated with the following Military Vocational Identifier ratings:

01W/OA M5 Assault Rifle

01EB Multi Threat Combatives

01ED Personal Armor Systems

01EE Biotic Warfare

01EI Environmental Survival

01EK UNSC Code of Military Justice

Per your completion your personnel records have been updated with the following awards/commendations and are available for wear with your dress uniform:

UNSC Service Ribbon

We wish you the best of luck with your training and look forward to your continued pursuit of excellence in the service of humanity.

Defend Humanity

UNSC Records VI 234-987 Sydney; UNSC Records VI 456-432 Arcturus; Lieutenant Nisma Radi, Sydney Office of Personnel Records \]

* * *

><p>Extranet Records [\ 2572-10-16
\]**

[Search Term] UNSC Training Facility Three

[Search Term] Earth

[Search Term] Omsk weather report

[Search Term] Application for Mindoir citizenship

[Search Term] Requirements for Mindoir citizenship

[Search Term] Status of Mindoir citizenship if you were born there

[Download] Systems Alliance Phase One Colony Registration Pamphlet

[Search Term] Tropical sims

[Search Term] Tropical beach sims

[Purchase] Simulstim: Eden Prime Virtual Vacation Series: Annwn Beach

* * *

><p>[\ Araceli L Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein [to] Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein \] [\ 2572-10-16 \]**

[\ Seriously. What the fuck is wrong with your head? Why is it shaped like that? \]

* * *

><p>[\ Galen M Kemp [A] Arc Pub Arcturus [to] Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein \] [\ 2572-10-16 \]**

[\ Can you believe this guy? Is he for real? \]

****[\ Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein [to] Galen M Kemp [A] Arc Pub Arcturus \] [\ 2572-10-16 \]****

[\ I sort of started ignoring him after the third time he talked about his gang back on Earth. \]

****[\ Galen M Kemp [A] Arc Pub Arcturus [to] Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein \] [\ 2572-10-16 \]****

[\ Yeah, no shit. This is going to be the longest trip ever if I have to listen to him talk the whole time. \]

****[\ Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein [to] Galen M Kemp [A] Arc Pub Arcturus \] [\ 2572-10-16 \]****

[\ You could try ignoring him. I downloaded the seventieth season of Captain Cosmic. I can share them if you want. \]

****[\ Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein [to] Galen M Kemp [A] Arc Pub Arcturus \] [\ 2572-10-16 \]****

[\ Or you can do that. \]

****[\ Galen M Kemp [A] Arc Pub Arcturus [to] Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein \] [\ 2572-10-16 \]****

[\ It shut him up, didn't it? \]

****[\ Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein [to] Galen M Kemp [A] Arc Pub Arcturus \] [\ 2572-10-16 \]****

[\ Did it? Did it really? \]

****[\ Galen M Kemp [A] Arc Pub Arcturus [to] Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein \] [\ 2572-10-16 \]****

[\ Okay, maybe it didn't. But it felt good. \]

****[\ Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein [to] Galen M Kemp [A] Arc Pub Arcturus \] [\ 2572-10-16 \]****

[\ Well, for clarification I'm ignoring you both now. And for further clarification, if this results in violence and I get hit, I'm kicking both of your asses. Consider yourself warned. \]

****[\ Galen M Kemp [A] Arc Pub Arcturus [to] Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein \] [\ 2572-10-16 \]****

[\ Sounds to me like watching Captain Cosmic has made you delirious if you think you can kick anyone's ass. Go back to jerking off over Ondrea Mostafavi. \]

****[\ Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein [to] Galen M Kemp [A] Arc Pub Arcturus \] [\ 2572-10-16 \]****

[\\ I'm not jerking off and she's still the best Captain Cosmic since Zina Demoz. Koo Hyang-Soon is a close third. \\]

****[\\ Galen M Kemp [A] Arc Pub Arcturus [to] Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein \\] [\\ 2572-10-16 \\]****

[\\ Don't care. Celestyn Law and her killer figure are going to be awesome. \\]

****[\\ Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein [to] Galen M Kemp [A] Arc Pub Arcturus \\] [\\ 2572-10-16 \\]****

[\\ Awesomely hilarious. Unintentionally. \\]

* * *

><p>ANN Newsbreak: Breaking News; Batarian Hegemony Unveils Cutting Edge Weapon [October 16th, 2572 Standard Terran Calendar]

The Batarian Hegemony has shocked the galaxy with vids of their new weapon technology shattering a small planetoid in the Edenlil star system within the Viper Nebula star cluster. The vids and accompanying speeches by Hegemony leadership proclaiming the new Kamaru warhead delivery system a game changing technology have taken the extranet by storm. Experts and VI analysis are inconclusive and dubious as to the veracity of the vids or weapon system, but the desired effect for fear and panic across the galaxy seem to have hit the mark.

****[Tap to play vids]****

In particular, the Systems Alliance seems to have been caught off guard by the development and the growing concern among the public of the threat along their borders.

Systems Alliance Minister of Defense Ludovica Cristaldi: "The Systems Alliance has been made aware of the extranet vid at the center of the this widespread hysteria. We are currently investigating the claims made and evidence provided as they do not correspond with our current appraisal of Hegemony capabilities. While we refrain from categorically dismissing the possibility of this technological leap forward, we remain unconvinced and suspicious of these latest claims by the Hegemony. What we ask now of the public is to have faith in the skill and tenacity of our men and women in uniform to defend humanity from any threat."

****[Tap to see full press conference]****

The Citadel Council has been watching the situation closely and has weighed in with more experience in dealing with the Hegemony.

Citadel Council Ministry of Galactic Relations Director Al'meda T'godo: "This is really a much ado about nothing. The batarians are always trying to stir up controversy and fear. Wouldn't be the first time they faked or lied about something to make themselves seem more impressive than they are. It's just what they do. If they ever had to actually back up their threats they'd be sent packing back into

Hegemony space so fast all four of their eyes would be spinning around inside their empty little heads. Just like the last time they tried it. You humans could really benefit from a more laid back approach to dealing with them rather than always being on edge."

****[Tap to see full galactic history of Batarian Hegemony acts of aggression]****

Not all of the reactions have been apathy or doom. Private defense contractors and security forces see potential for increased profits from a panicked populace.

Elanus Risk Control Services Chief Marketing Officer Velginia Enninis: "War is always good for business. The threat of war is even better."

****[Tap to see latest market trends from Earth, Bekenstein, Elysium, and Reach.] [Tap to see latest market trends from galactic markets]****

Experts on the matters share the opinion that the feasibility and practical nature of such weapons are overstated.

Kahje University Foremost Among Peers on Dark Energy Weaponry Nomondyr: "This one estimates that the amount of Element Zero required for such devices would be counterproductive in a disposable warhead. If the Hegemony is unwavering in their irrational pursuit of crippling their economy by means of mass producing these priceless weapons, then it is the advice of this one to allow them to complete their folly."

****[Tap to see [Terran Translation: 2567 CE, Terran Calendar] Serrice Symposium on Element Zero Policy]****

* * *

><p>[\ Anna S Vasilyeva [A] Yeka RF Earth [to] Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein \] [\ 2572-10-17 \]**

[\ So this isn't that bad. The drill instructor isn't as much of a psycho as Bramante. I might actually enjoy my time on Reach after all. How are things going for you? \]

****[\ Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein [to] Anna S Vasilyeva [A] Yeka RF Earth \] [\ 2572-10-17 \]****

[\ I'm sharing a cabin with Galen and some asshole named Finch. They've really hit it off. And by hit it off I mean they're close to hitting each other. \]

****[\ Anna S Vasilyeva [A] Yeka RF Earth [to] Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein \] [\ 2572-10-17 \]****

[\ Hitting each other? Or hitting on each other? You may or may not be aware, but there's a difference. Should I be worried? \]

****[\ Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein [to] Anna S Vasilyeva [A] Yeka RF Earth \] [\ 2572-10-17 \]****

[\\ I'm aware of the difference and this is leaning more towards violence. This guy is pretty big. Covered in tats and looks like he's been in and out of prison. Or the Terminus. But he's headed to Bravo MVC like the rest of us. \\]

****[\\ Anna S Vasilyeva [A] Yeka RF Earth [to] Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein \\] [\\ 2572-10-17 \\]****

[\\ Ooooooooo. A bad boy with tats? I'm intrigued. Is he good looking? Are there shirts being ripped off? I need details! Holos! Don't leave me hanging! \\]

****[\\ Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein [to] Anna S Vasilyeva [A] Yeka RF Earth \\] [\\ 2572-10-17 \\]****

[\\ Here. This might satisfy your blood lust. Or regular lust. [Tap to access vid] \\]

****[\\ Anna S Vasilyeva [A] Yeka RF Earth [to] Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein \\] [\\ 2572-10-17 \\]****

[\\ I want to be mad at you, but I've actually become engrossed in this vid on Vorcha mating rituals you've sent me. I'm never looking at someone playfully biting me in bed the same way again. \\]

* * *

><p>[\\ Augustus K Zuromskis [A] Milg Bekenstein [to] Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein \\] [\\ 2572-10-17 \\]**

[\\ Dude! I'm headed to Mars! You know what that means, right? Martian girls!

How was your UCMT? My drill instructor was an asshole, but I guess they all are, huh?

Do you know one of the girls in my platoon broke my nose? Total bitch. She kept thinking I was staring at her during shower time, but I was all like 'You're not even that hot!'

Whatever. What about you? Any hot girls in your platoon? Mine had total dogs. Well except for this one. But she called me a walking sexual harassment lawsuit waiting to happen. Like I would do that. Not when there are hot women out there. On Mars! Hell yeah!

So where are you headed now? Probably someplace cool for super cool biotics. That's totally fucking awesome you're a biotic man. Women are going to love that.

Hey did you ever get the omni address of that one redhead from MEPS? I saw her a couple of times during UCMT. Still smoking hot. You should totally hit that.

I didn't want to say anything, but something has been bothering me.

I just want to say thanks for looking for me at MEPS. You know, with the thing. But, what happened? I remember waking up naked. In ice. Naked. What happened?

We didn't... do anything, did we?

I don't know but I just want to say I don't really like you that way.

You understand, right?

Cool. Keep it rockin', brah.

I gotta go. I figured out this group of cute girls in the cabin two doors down head to eat their meals at certain times. I'm going to try and talk to them this time. They're headed to Mars, so that means they're probably Martians, right? \]

[\ ***Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein [to] Augustus K Zuromskis [A] Milg Bekenstein \] [\ 2572-10-17 \]****

[\ Nothing happened. Please don't ever mention that night ever again. I'm doing my best to try and forget it. \]

* * *

><p>[Private Vidchat Transcript] [\ 2572-10-17
\]

Username: LizLuvsLaw [Elizabeth Magdalena Shepard; Identitag: Luna 179977EMS2550]

LizLuvsLaw [Login] [Online] [Greater Boston Metro Area, UNAS, Earth, Sol, Orior Cluster]

Username: BekensteinsMonster [Luis Vincent Shepard; Identitag: Mindoir 847261LVS2554]

BekensteinsMonster [Login] [Online] [Interstellar Comm Buoy 49-14, -Sol Corridor, Orior Cluster]

LizLuvsLaw: I understand congratulations are in order.

BekensteinsMonster: Not really. I still have MVC to attend before I'm finished.

LizLuvsLaw: Do I even want to know what that means?

BekensteinsMonster: My military profession school. Infantry training.

LizLuvsLaw: Oh. Nana said something about that. You're headed to Earth?

BekensteinsMonster: Yeah, somewhere in Russia. Omsk? What's the weather like there right now?

LizLuvsLaw: How the hell should I know? I'm on the other side of the planet.

BekensteinsMonster: Can you check for me?

LizLuvsLaw: â€| I'm not your VI, Luis. Check it your damn self. [Unintelligible] Five degrees. Hope the UNSC issued you warm clothes.

BekensteinsMonster: Fuck my life. Does every place the UNSC send people to train have to be freezing?

LizLuvsLaw: I take it Reach was cold?

BekensteinsMonster: What was your first clue?

LizLuvsLaw: Well this is what you wanted, right? Deal with it. Or are you going to whine and complain about this too?

BekensteinsMonster: Don't start. I'm not in the mood for it.

LizLuvsLaw: I'm not starting anything. I am pointing out that you made your choice to run off and join the Marines. Now you live with the consequences.

BekensteinsMonster: Whatever. [Unintelligible]

LizLuvsLaw: Why are you mumbling?

BekensteinsMonster: I'm walking around the lounge on the transport and I don't want people eavesdropping on my conversation.

LizLuvsLaw: Why don't you just head to your sleeping bay if you want privacy?

BekensteinsMonster: I've been in my sleep bay for most of the trip.

LizLuvsLaw: Are you that tired?

BekensteinsMonster: No. [Unintelligible] Well, not at first. But my cabin is filled with other recruits headed to Earth from Reach. One of them is a fucking asshole that keeps trying to pick fights with everyone. You can only watch so many vids to waste time before you even get bored from that.

LizLuvsLaw: Isn't that what you're supposed to do in the UNSC? Pick fights with people?

BekensteinsMonster: No. All I've learned in the UNSC so far is to get up before the day begins, do everything I am told, and never talk back.

LizLuvsLaw: In other words teaching you to be responsible and disciplined. Good to know the UNSC is at least fixing those issues with you.

BekensteinsMonster: [Unintelligible] Actually, it's more like teaching me how to be perpetually tired, hungry, sore, and frustrated.

LizLuvsLaw: Welcome to how the galaxy works in real life then. It's about time you stop being such a coddled little

brat.

BekensteinsMonster: You know, I'm trying to have a civil conversation with you. Could you at least pretend to be a normal human being with regular feelings when talking to their sibling for once in your life?

LizLuvsLaw: I am. I care about what happens to you. Someone needs to tell you these things because everyone else is too afraid or blind.

BekensteinsMonster: Too afraid of what?

LizLuvsLaw: [Sighs] Mom and dad were in a bad place for the last few years. We all knew that. Mom was never around because of work and her trips to Elysium for training-

BekensteinsMonster: Yeah, among other things.

LizLuvsLaw: You know what? You're right. She felt a lot of guilt for that and what was happening back on Mindoir. And then when they died and you two went through the horrible ordeal everyone made sure not to push the two of you. Tata started to realize it too late. You two have been indulged and babied when you should have been forced to mature. To grow up.

BekensteinsMonster: Don't act like you knew what was going on back home. You ran off and never looked back while everything was going to shit back home.

LizLuvsLaw: Yeah, so I wasn't right in the middle of it when it all ended. But I grew up in that house just like you and could see what was happening.

BekensteinsMonster: Still doesn't mean you have any right to sit there and criticize me or Ari or Dad. You already had your mind made up before you left for college.

LizLuvsLaw: Don't you dare try to talk to me about being ignorant or unaware. You're not the one who had to deal with mom breaking down crying during vidchats because she didn't know what to do with the situation. You're not the one that tried to talk to Dad to get him to straighten up and stop drinking only for him to get pissed off and tell you that you're just as bad as your mother.

BekensteinsMonster: [Unintelligible]

LizLuvsLaw: Well? Are you going to say anything?

BekensteinsMonster: I don't know.

LizLuvsLaw: [Unintelligible] Look, I don't expect you to change overnight, but you need to let this fantasy go of how everything would have been alright if things just stayed the way they were on Mindoir. Nothing ever stays the same and our parents' relationship had become unhealthy. It would have been good, for both of them, to divorce and move on. So you have to move on too.

BekensteinsMonster: Fine.

LizLuvsLaw: Are you going to be okay?

BekensteinsMonster: I don't know.

LizLuvsLaw: Wonderful. You've gone back into petulant and sulky mode again.

BekensteinsMonster: What the fuck do you expect me to do? Be all happy and excited? Kiss your ass and tell you how awesome you are for being better than me?

LizLuvsLaw: That's another thing you need to let go. It's never been about a competition between us. No one cares which one of us is better than the other except you. No one even thinks in those terms.

BekensteinsMonster: Fuck off. It's always so perfect and easy for you. You haven't had people telling you 'Be more like Lizzy' all your life.

LizLuvsLaw: And you don't have people telling you 'Don't make the same mistakes your mother made.'

BekensteinsMonster: Then if you know how fucked up that can be why do you insist on doing it to me? Is this fun to you? Some game to pick on your brother?

LizLuvsLaw: No, it's to make you grow up. You're still a self centered little brat that never had to do much but help run the farm and that mostly handled itself with automation.

BekensteinsMonster: What would you know? You never did anything to help on the farm but play with haptics. If I'm not supposed to be like you then shouldn't you be happy I at least chose to do something even if it's not something you agree with?

LizLuvsLaw: I don't think you really made a choice. I think you just picked something you thought would be easy and bought you time to figure out what you really want to do.

BekensteinsMonster: So basically I can't do anything right and you're going to continue trying to make me feel miserable for not being as good as you. Got it. Good to know.

LizLuvsLaw: You. Are. Insufferable. I'm trying to help you.

BekensteinsMonster: You think this helps me? You're more delusional than I thought.

LizLuvsLaw: Fine. Prove me wrong then. Make something of yourself.

BekensteinsMonster: What does that even mean? Make something of myself? Is this another one of your mind games where no matter what I do I'm some sort of disappointment?

LizLuvsLaw: Let me put it his way. Do you really see the UNSC as a career?

BekensteinsMonster: [Unintelligible] I don't know. It's complicated.

LizLuvsLaw: Why?

BekensteinsMonster: I'm a biotic.

LizLuvsLaw: Okay. And?

BekensteinsMonster: They like to put biotics into special forces training. So... it's kind of inevitable they're going to do that with me.

LizLuvsLaw: Is that something you're not sure of?

BekensteinsMonster: I don't know.

LizLuvsLaw: Then what do you know?

BekensteinsMonster: Stop talking to me like th-

LizLuvsLaw: I'm being serious. What do you know? Because your favorite response to things is to be quiet or say you don't know. So tell me, what do you know?

BekensteinsMonster: If I pass then I'm in for the long haul. They want special forces candidates to be in service for several years. Maybe a decade or two.

LizLuvsLaw: But if you fail...

BekensteinsMonster: Then I'm just doing my eight years and then moving on.

LizLuvsLaw: Okay. So then that's your choice. Do you want to fail or succeed at this?

BekensteinsMonster: I don't kn- [Unintelligible] If I fail, does that make me a failure? I don't have a choice about attending when they finally put me in. [Unintelligible] Well, I suppose I could make myself such a terrible Marine that they never pick me because they're more busy trying to get me kicked out of the UNSC.

LizLuvsLaw: But you're not going to pick that childish route. So find your path from there and prove me wrong. That you're not immature and coddled. That you're willing to dedicate yourself towards fulfilling your potential in whatever it is you choose to do.

BekensteinsMonster: Okay.

LizLuvsLaw: If I know you're not just living in the past and being a brat then I can stop worrying about you.

BekensteinsMonster: [Unintelligible] Fine. What about you?

LizLuvsLaw: What about me?

BekensteinsMonster: [Unintelligible] Uh, Tia Alicia told me about your internship with MI Squared before I went to UCMT.

LizLuvsLaw: Oh.

BekensteinsMonster: So. How did that turn out?

LizLuvsLaw: Great. I'm really psyched to be working there in my spare time.

BekensteinsMonster: Well, I'm really happy for you.

LizLuvsLaw: Seriously?

BekensteinsMonster: Yeah, I guess. I mean, Mom and Dad would be proud. This is what you want to do, right?

LizLuvsLaw: Thanks. I really appreciate it. I want to work in the prosecution office when I leave school.

BekensteinsMonster: Oh. That's neat. I have no clue what that would entail.

LizLuvsLaw: Lots of stimulants, late nights, and little pay. But I enjoy the work.

BekensteinsMonster: Sounds like fun. What do you do?

LizLuvsLaw: Lots of prep work for investigations. Mostly helping organize recordings, witness statements, a little VI programming for the evidence library. It's very interesting stuff. Challenging too.

BekensteinsMonster: So you want to go and work for the Systems Alliance then, huh? What do Abuela and Abuelo think about that?

LizLuvsLaw: Well, Nana thinks it's hilarious. She said private defense and consultation is where the credits are at, but MI Squared is where the power is at. Tata is more pleased than anything.

BekensteinsMonster: Why?

LizLuvsLaw: Well, I might have talked to him about politics and things a while back.

BekensteinsMonster: You want to get into politics?

LizLuvsLaw: Maybe. I'm not sure.

BekensteinsMonster: Now who is the one saying I don't know?

LizLuvsLaw: I didn't say I don't know.

BekensteinsMonster: Same difference.

LizLuvsLaw: Fine. I'm sort of stuck in the same situation you are. Politics sounds appealing, but I'm not sure I want to get

involved.

BekensteinsMonster: Well, I'm sure whatever you choose you'll do great.

LizLuvsLaw: Really?

BekensteinsMonster: Yeah. You're stubborn and arrogant that way.

LizLuvsLaw: Aw, thanks.

BekensteinsMonster: Only you would see those as virtues.

LizLuvsLaw: Only you would be intimidated by someone who possesses those virtues.

BekensteinsMonster: The joke you're not getting is those are not compliments.

LizLuvsLaw: The joke you're not getting is that your professional and dating life is going to be miserable if you can't handle strong people.

BekensteinsMonster: [Unintelligible] I'm pretty sure a miserable dating life is part of the UNSC.

LizLuvsLaw: That might be true. So you have a built in excuse for your inability to charm people now.

BekensteinsMonster: Yeah. Maybe.

LizLuvsLaw: Don't get all petulant on me again. I'm just teasing you.

BekensteinsMonster: I know. I'm just... [Unintelligible] Forget it.

LizLuvsLaw: No. I know we're not always on good terms, but if there's something wrong you can talk to me.

BekensteinsMonster: I.. well, I might have had an issue with a girl.

LizLuvsLaw: Issue? What happened?

BekensteinsMonster: It's embarrassing.

LizLuvsLaw: Then it's sexual. [Unintelligible] I don't need to know details, but did you do something illegal?

BekensteinsMonster: What? No!

LizLuvsLaw: Just clarifying. So what went wrong? No details.

BekensteinsMonster: [Sighs] I had an accident with my biotics.

LizLuvsLaw: Crap.

BekensteinsMonster: And she didn't know I was a biotic.

LizLuvsLaw: Damn it. You didn't hurt her, did you?

BekensteinsMonster: No. But she freaked out and called me a mutant.

LizLuvsLaw: Oh, Luis. I'm really sorry you had to go through that.

BekensteinsMonster: It just sucks. I finally get a girl interested in me and then that happens.

LizLuvsLaw: Wait. Was that your first time? When did this happen?

BekensteinsMonster: [Unintelligible] On the Citadel before I left for UCMT.

LizLuvsLaw: Really? You never... you know? On Mindoir?

BekensteinsMonster: No.

LizLuvsLaw: Seriously?

BekensteinsMonster: Yes, Lizzy.

LizLuvsLaw: Wow. I thought that's all teenagers did on Mindoir. I'm pretty sure everyone when I was in high school was having sex. Nothing else to do on that colony.

BekensteinsMonster: I don't need to know who you were screwing in high school. And thanks for making me feel like an even bigger loser.

LizLuvsLaw: I'm not trying to make you feel like a loser. And I only slept with Lukas and Quentin. And Jacek but he doesn't really count.

BekensteinsMonster: What does that even mean? [Unintelligible] You know what? Nevermind. Stop. I do not want to hear about this.

LizLuvsLaw: Seriously? Not even when you were on Bekenstein?

BekensteinsMonster: C'mon. You know what happened there.

LizLuvsLaw: Right. Well... I don't know what to tell you. Be yourself?

BekensteinsMonster: What? That's your advice?

LizLuvsLaw: You're not dead. There will be other women. UNSC uniforms look good.

BekensteinsMonster: This is so unfair. First Ari teases me about

being more experienced and now you're doing it.

LizLuvsLaw: Stop feeling sorry for yourself. [Unintelligible] Wait, what was that about Ari?

BekensteinsMonster: [Unintelligible] Uh. Shit. Nothing. I said nothing. Forget it.

LizLuvsLaw: I just need to know his name so I can threaten him for even looking at our baby sister.

BekensteinsMonster: Oh. Uh, Nigel. I think.

LizLuvsLaw: After that I'm going to be having a talk with her.

BekensteinsMonster: Just, uh, don't mention me.

LizLuvsLaw: I won't have to. Everyone knows you're the worst person to tell a secret.

BekensteinsMonster: Whatever. Speaking of boyfriends, I'll let you go. I know you have a lot to do before spending time with your older gentleman.

LizLuvsLaw: [Unintelligible] What? I don't... who told you about that?

BekensteinsMonster: I love you, Lizzy. This talk has been great. Bye.

LizLuvsLaw: You two are the worst! I hate you both!

****BekensteinsMonster: [Offline]****

LizLuvsLaw: Why couldn't I have been an only child?

****LizLuvsLaw: [Offline]****

* * *

><p>Extranet Records [\ 2572-10-17
\]**

[Search Term] ICT

[Search Term] N Series

[Search Term] ODS

[Search Term] ICT preparation

[Purchase] Vidbook: Surviving the Drop: A Primer for UNSC Special Force Training by Addi Hellman

[Purchase] Vid: Helljumpers: A Real Look Into N Series by Brigitta Torell

[Purchase] Simulstim: Drop Buddy: An Authentic ODS Personal

Trainer

[Search Term] Biotic warfare

[Purchase] Vidbook: Dark Energy on the Battlefield: Uses and Defenses
by Matriarch Eshri Januios

[Search Term] Civilian careers for biotics

[Search Term] Illyria University

[Search Term] Illyria University military education
programming

[Search Term] Illyria University majors

[Search Term] Sisters are a pain in the ass

[Search Term] Nigel Sargasso Bekenstein

[Search Term] Nigel Araceli Sargasso Bekenstein

* * *

><p>[\ Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein [to] Nigel
T Garrington [A] Sarg Bekenstein \] [\ 2572-10-17 \]**

[\ Hi. I'm Araceli's older brother. The biotic one in the Marines? I
just wanted to let you know our older sister, Lizzy, wants to talk
with you.

Did I mention that she works with MI Squared?

Under most circumstances I would just let this happen and see what
she does to you, but I'm secretly hoping she leaves you intact. That
way the next time I'm on Bekenstein we could hang out. Talk.
Somewhere private. Where no one can hear your screams for help.

Did I mention that I'm a biotic? And in the Marines? I think I might
have mentioned that. \]

****[Nigel T Garrington [A] Sarg Bekenstein [to] Luis V Shepard [A]
Sarg Bekenstein \] [\ 2572-10-17 \]****

[\ Wait. You're the one that knocked Pavlo Tarasuk out with biotics,
right? \]

****[Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein [to] Nigel T Garrington [A]
Sarg Bekenstein \] [\ 2572-10-17 \]****

[\ Yes. Yes I am. Looking forward to meeting you. Tell Ari I said hi.
\]

* * *

><p>[Private Vidchat Transcript] [\ 2572-10-18
\]

**Username: BekensteinsMonster [Luis Vincent Shepard; Identitag:
Mindoir 847261LVS2554]**

****BekensteinsMonster [Login] [Online] [Interstellar Comm Buoy 49-12, -Sol Corridor, Orior Cluster]****

******Username: HesiodsFables [Julian Bonifacio Gonzalez; Identitag:*****Bekenstein 489309JG2520******

******HesiodsFables [Login] [Online] [Zakera Ward, Citadel, Widow, Serpent Nebula]******

HesiodsFables: And to what do I owe this pleasure?

BekensteinsMonster: I can't say hi to my favorite uncle?

HesiodsFables: You can, but you're not known for being this social. Or thoughtful. Plus I'm technically your only uncle.

BekensteinsMonster: Well, Tio Kamal might have you beat when it comes to the cool job.

HesiodsFables: Why am I not shocked.

BekensteinsMonster: Plus Tia Alicia scares the crap out of me when she goes into work mode. The fact he can withstand that is impressive

HesiodsFables: She's actually mellowed out, if you can believe it. When we were younger it used to be worse than what you and Lizzy do.

BekensteinsMonster: Oh, so you've noticed that?

HesiodsFables: It's like watching history repeat itself. The women in our family love trying to get us in line. Usually with threats and disparaging comments.

BekensteinsMonster: I guess. How did you deal with it?

HesiodsFables: I stopped listening and just did my own thing. You're never going to satisfy others and yourself. So fuck what everyone else thinks and do what you want to do.

BekensteinsMonster: That might be the most straight forward advice I've gotten so far. Thanks, tio. You've made it back to the favorite uncle position.

HesiodsFables: I'm thrilled. So you graduated from UCMT?

BekensteinsMonster: Yeah. Headed to Earth now.

HesiodsFables: I'm proud of you. I know your mother would be as well.

BekensteinsMonster: Thanks.

HesiodsFables: Your grandmother made you contact everyone, didn't she?

BekensteinsMonster: How did you know?

HesiodsFables: She did the same thing to me when I went off to college. I got chewed out for an hour straight after my first semester away.

BekensteinsMonster: Well at least I avoided that.

HesiodsFables: What didn't you avoid then?

BekensteinsMonster: She just mocked me about my haircut and stuff.

HesiodsFables: That's not a haircut. That's a tragedy.

BekensteinsMonster: It's not like it's shaved down to the scalp. They just trim it down.

HesiodsFables: Oh you have to promise me you'll vidchat with Abuela Elvira that way.

BekensteinsMonster: Why?

HesiodsFables: That old goat will complain about anything. I remember her calling me a 'whore' for dying my hair blue when I was a teen. Be sure to vid it for posterity. I want a copy.

BekensteinsMonster: I'll think about it.

HesiodsFables: Well, your obligation is done. You can go back to being antisocial.

BekensteinsMonster: Actually, I'm going back to sleep.

HesiodsFables: Always a good choice on a transport. Get it when you can. Catch to you later, sobrino.

BekensteinsMonster: Bye, tio.

****HesiodsFables: [Offline]****

****BekensteinsMonster: [Offline]****

* * *

><p>[\ Anna S Vasilyeva [A] Yeka RF Earth [to] Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein \] [\ 2572-10-18 \]**

[\ I take it back. My drill instructor is a soft spoken sadist. And something is still taking my undersuit tops. I think your theory on laundry machines really being wormholes for intergalactic gremlins might have merit. \]

* * *

><p>[\ Araceli L Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein [to] Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein \] [\ 2572-10-18 \]**

[\ What did you and Lizzy do to Nigel?! \]

****[\ Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein [to] Araceli L Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein \] *****[\ 2572-10-18 \]****

[\ Nothing permanent. Just wanted to introduce ourselves. Why? Did he break up with you? \]

****[\ Araceli L Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein [to] Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein \] [\ 2572-10-18 \]****

[\ Yes, but I was looking for an excuse to drop his lame ass anyways so this worked out perfectly. I was just making sure neither of you did something illegal. \]

****[\ Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein [to] Araceli L Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein \] [\ 2572-10-18 \]****

[\ Wait. So you're not mad? \]

****[\ Araceli L Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein [to] Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein \] [\ 2572-10-18 \]****

[\ I'm fucking ecstatic. He was getting all clingy and talking about getting married when we get older. Pssssh. I mean, he's cute and sweet and all, but so not someone I could imagine sharing my life and bed with. \]

****[\ Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein [to] Araceli L Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein \] [\ 2572-10-18 \]****

[\ So you're saying we did you a favor? \]

****[\ Araceli L Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein [to] Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein \] [\ 2572-10-18 \]****

[\ A massive one. Now I get to ask that cute guy in my math class if he wants to go to the dance next month without mister clingy being all mopey and trying to cock block me. I am just so psyched! You and Lizzy are the best siblings ever! \]

****[\ Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein [to] Araceli L Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein \] [\ 2572-10-18 \]****

[\ That wasn't the result I was looking for, but whatever. \]

****[\ Araceli L Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein [to] Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein \] [\ 2572-10-18 \]****

[\ But this is, like, a million times better. Ah! I'm so excited. I have to go tell Nana we have to go dress shopping. I want to look good for this. See ya! I love you! Even if your head is weird shaped! \]

****AN:** Apologies for the delay. Had to work out some details for this arc. Again, this chapter, and pretty much the majority of this story, will focus on Shepard's development as a young adult and soldier while providing a background to introduce aspects of the greater galaxy.**

* * *

><p>UNSC Training Facility Three, Omsk Oblast, Russian Federal Republic, Earth, Sol System, Orior Cluster; October 18th, 2572 [Standardized Terran Calendar], 1458 [Local Time, Terran Standard]

So I'd made it to the 'homeworld' just to find out there was a perfectly good reason so many of us left. The wonder of finally being on Earth where it all began was definitely marred by the frigid temperature on the Siberian plains. The slipspace lag wasn't helping either.

At least I finally understood all of the complaints from the natives to Sol. Travel around this solar system was ridiculous because the UNSC Air Force kept a very tight leash on all traffic. A simple ten light year trip from Epsilon Eridani lasted the better part of two days. With the overwhelming majority of humanity, and thus a large portion of our commerce and travel, residing within our home system it was somewhat understandable. The need for security was too high to worry about inconveniences. But it still sucked.

Our transport had arrived at the Rakesh Sharma geosynchronous station hours ago earlier this morning but the absurdly large amount of people arriving or departing made disembarking and passing through customs a nightmare. We had only arrived here in Omsk less than an hour ago after another stomach churning Pelican dropship ride. Thankfully I had managed to avoid being coated in vomit this time around.

Unfortunately, just as my earlier trip from the Bekenstein to the Citadel, I had not managed to avoid being seated next to an obnoxious ass. The first forty five minutes of exposure to Damian Finch and Galen's subsequent reactions made me wish for simpler times with Auggie talking about how many girls and asari he was going to nail.

After the same song and dance of meeting the company staff and being issued our gear we were left standing out here in a field lightly dusted with snow. Doing my best to remain warm I was starting to appreciate the military motto of 'Hurry up and wait.'. The entire training facility was smaller than the one back on Reach but it was exclusively for training light infantry for the UNSC Army and Marines at all levels. Third platoon, the platoon we were all being assigned to, was strictly for MVC level one trainees. Light infantry novices. The rest of the platoons were dedicated to training more seasoned bravo series troops for higher MVC level designations. Many of whom watched us from a distance with gazes and grins that made me nervous.

Our Drill Instructor emerged from a nearby building and stalked across the snowy field with gait of predator. I eyed her warily, hoping to make a better impression with this DI than I had with the last. As she neared I saw she was tall, lean and blonde in her full

body armor with a swagger to her walk and slight sneer on her face as she stared us down. After her silent appraisal she introduced herself, "I am Chief Sergeant Sienna Ellison and this is the Omsk Military Training Facility. Home of the UNSC Bravo Series MVC school. You fine young warriors of humanity are here to attend level one schooling."

"The duration spent in UCMT was to educate you in the rudimentary principles of being a member of the UNSC armed forces. My job is to train you neophytes to be the foundation of the UNSC." Her pacing back and forth was so unlike DI Bramante. He had been a bit of a stomper, treating every step like the floor beneath him offended him somehow. Even in her armor DI Ellison was more light on her feet, graceful but powerful as she stepped across the muddy and snowy grounds. Stealthy. I immediately got the idea she was more than competent at sneaking up on others. "Everyone has a part to play. Pilots. Techs. Engineers. Logistical support. Armor. But you, my brave young pupils? You will be the dogs of war that cry havoc and engage threats head on. Slipping through the colorless expanse of vacuum to perform boarding actions on ships. Penetrating the defenses of stations and facilities like the foot soldiers of yore. Patrolling remote areas that no soul possessing a functioning sense of self preservation would visit. Battling across vast stretches of uninhabited and hostile worlds for the glory of ensuring it stays that way. If it has not become readily apparent to you, this calling is not an elegant or enchanting one. If you seek glory and prestige, then this will not be the place for you. There will be no mammoth vessels with posh accommodations or sleek speeding vehicles with sexy weapons. No elaborate terminal stations with more haptic displays than you have neurons to comprehend them. It will be pernicious and merciless to you and those obtuse enough to fight against you. This calling is not about disregarding the reality of your duty but being capable of acknowledging it and still walking into that perilous breach every time you are called upon. With vigor. With resolve. With valor."

My mind wandered to First Sergeant Yilmaz's instructions. I'd yet to fully wrap my mind around the fact that ICT might be in my future whether I wanted it or not. Thinking it over during the trip here didn't help shed any more wisdom to my dilemma, but that time had run out. It was time to make a choice now. Do I approach MVC with a new mindset to see what I was capable of? Or do I just want to coast and do my eight years?

DI Ellison grinned wickedly, her breath coming out in frozen puffs, "Now, I would be remiss and a dreadful instructor if I didn't give you a tour of the base itself. So, how about we embark upon your time here with a brisk and invigorating twelve kilometer jaunt to help you shake off that slipspace lag?"

A few basic commands later and we set off in two columns at a fair clip. Not nearly as fast as anything we had been doing in UCMT during the last weeks. But then she introduced a new wrinkle.

At her mark the pair at the rear of the formation were to sprint to the front and rejoin the group. With each instance her enjoyment at berating the last pair on just how slow their sprinting was grew.

As my turn neared I contemplated that this was my first opportunity to make an effort and a good impression on my DI. Between visible

breaths from the brisk jog I settled back into the quandary and internal struggle that had plagued me the entire trip here.

Did I really want to make the UNSC a career?

I'd only been in training that had left me miserable so far, and if I did want to succeed then that would guarantee more misery and challenging training. I'd always be taking orders from someone. Probably people I hated. I'd probably always be reduced to my value as a biotic. I'd never be able to choose my own path in life. At least not in any meaningful way.

But would I have that freedom if I left the service after my eight years? Did I want to return to Bekenstein after my enlistment was done to hear people remind me over and over again what I should be doing with my life now? How I had wasted these years of my life and needed to play catch up with some imaginary timeline of where I should be? Isn't that what I was trying to avoid in the first place? I'd yet to even figure out what I was going to study with my online courses. And then there was the fact that being a biotic might count against me in the civilian world. I might not be able to pursue a career in whatever field I wanted because of employers having a dislike or risk aversion towards hiring a biotic.

For the millionth time I lamented my foolish belief in thinking that joining the UNSC would give me time to figure out what I wanted to do with my life. Not even six months in and I was being faced with even more daunting and life altering decisions about my future.

I tried thinking back to all the bits of advice and help people in my life had given me. Words of wisdom that might make this decision more clear. I'd even settle for less pressure at this point.

Then, of all people, the very man who had recently informed me of this new path sprung to mind. Something First Sergeant Yilmaz had said. Not about me, but himself.

'That leaves me with two choices. I could forget all my training about being proactive towards a situation and throw a tantrum over your being accepted as you are. Or I could do my job, as a veteran N series and your instructor, to begin molding you. Preparing you. Motivate you and point you in the right direction.'

In that moment I had the clarity I sought. I was throwing a lengthy tantrum because I didn't like the choices being provided in my life. If I was being perfectly honest with myself, I had been throwing that tantrum since I realized my parent's marriage was disintegrating back on Mindoir.

When my turn finally came I braced myself. I could continue to whine and complain about the choices being provided, or I could do something about it. Just like my Abuela had said, I didn't have control over what anyone else thought I should be doing and that didn't matter. The only thing I had control over was my own actions and effort. If I was going to make a difference in my life then I needed to put forth my best effort at everything.

Breaking from formation with powerful strides, I poured all my energy into sprinting to the front of the platoon.

It wasn't going to be easy, but I already knew that. Bring it on.

* * *

><p>UNSC Training Facility Three, Omsk Oblast, Russian Federal Republic, Earth, Sol System, Orior Cluster; October 26th, 2572 [Standardized Terran Calendar], 1558 [Local Time, Terran Standard]

I wiped the mixture of snow and sand from my face and sighed. DI Ellison was a sadist to have us outside doing hand to hand drills in the freezing cold but I wasn't going to back down from the challenge. I'd done my damndest to excel in the time I'd been here and had been rewarded with leadership of first squad. I wasn't about to lose that.

Even if that meant I couldn't really feel my fingers. Or my toes. Or my ears.

I'd also thrown myself into spending all of my spare time in practicing my biotics and hand to hand skills. It had paid off as I was starting to win more than I lost, but DI Ellison saw my determination to perform better as an invitation to pair me up with the largest guy in the platoon.

If I had thought Dahlia Oberst had been huge back on Mindoir then she was dwarfed by Prabhu Dasgupta. I still wasn't convinced either of them were not the result of some secret program to cross breed humans with krogans. Squinting at Prabhu's massive form while he leaned forward on his knees to catch his breath I also had the epiphany he might be a hairless runt from a litter of jiralhanae.

Standing up and shaking off the pain of bumps and bruises I sized my opponent up. I had been foolish in trying to grapple with him. He was just too big. As much as I wanted the satisfaction of tossing him to the ground that just wasn't going to happen unless I got in close. And that meant I was open to him using his superior size and strength to throw me around instead. I had to stick with my strengths in this situation. Speed and mobility.

We squared off once more and slowly circled one another. I threw a kick feint at his legs and he sidestepped as I had hoped. Following along with my plan I quickly circled around and got in close on his left flank. His reaction was to spin around quickly and lunge at the opportunity of seeing me so close. I reversed my momentum and knocked away his closest forearm. Latching onto his right shoulder I pulled myself forward and drove my right knee into his midsection. Prabhu managed to flinch away to absorb most of the strike but was still left reeling and out of breath. Deciding I had pushed my luck being this close for this long I disengaged by swinging my right arm outwards and connecting against the exposed right side of his head with the side of my fist.

Dancing back out of his range I took a moment to reevaluate the situation and saw Prabhu was pretty pissed off with the way our latest exchange had gone. The sting of my blows showed in the way he stared at me. Taking the initiative this time he closed the distance between us causing me to back step haphazardly and fall flat on my ass. He pounced on my mistake and I barely managed to roll out of the way. Scrambling to my feet I was tripped and fell face first as

Prabhu grasped my left ankle. My face stung as it hit the icy sand but I shook it off and kicked with my free foot. Connecting with his face I kicked again and he let go of my ankle. Rolling over I was treated to yet another attempt by Prabhu to mount me in the ground and pound.

This time I wasn't so lucky. He pinned me and pressed me with his weight before unloading punches at my head. The first blow smashed into my face just below my right eye before I could get my arms up. My vision was blinded long enough for a second blow to come to the left side of my head near my ear and completely disorient me. I instinctively brought my arms up to guard my head and tried to gather my wits. The blows kept coming as Prabhu tried to pry my hands away and deliver a clean punch to unprotected areas of my head.

The cold sand pit beneath me combined with each blow to sap my will to fight back. I was clearly outmatched and had lost.

But the drive that had been pushing me since I had arrived on Earth had me reconsider what I had to lose in giving it one more try? Did I really want to just give up?

I didn't have that much faith in my options but I gave it a shot anyways. The next time Prabhu leaned in to deliver another blow I trapped his arm and bucked my hips to make him lose his balance. Straining to breath after this baby krogan had fallen right on my chest I hooked my leg around his to use his weight against him and roll us over.

Except it didn't work exactly the way I had hoped. We ended up in a tangle of limbs with Prabhu still on top and recovered from my attempt. He pressed his right forearm with all his weight under my chin and choked me. I tried to knock the arm off but I was already out of breath and the lack of oxygen was starting to make me panic. Prabhu took advantage of that panic and delivered one brutal punch with his left hand that had me seeing stars before blacking out.

Stunned for a moment, I opened my eyes and shut them just as quickly. A throbbing headache and spinning vision caused me to roll over and upchuck my lunch. Coughing and hacking out the remaining vomit I gasped for breath as the back of my throat burned from the combination of cold air and stomach acids. Opening my eyes again I saw Prabhu looking concerned off to the side and DI Ellison kneeling over me with her omnitool active.

She narrowed her eyes at the vomit that was slowly freezing off to the side of my head and then looked back at me. "You copacetic, recruit?"

I nodded and went to speak, but immediately regretted it as the nausea and pain returned. I dropped my head back into the cold sand, eyes squeezed shut again and groaning in agony. I heard her sigh and stand up, her voice making my head throb as she yelled across the sand pit we used for hand to hand training "Kemp! Move your malnourished ass over here and help your compatriot get to sick call before he decides to purge his stomach again."

A moment later I felt a pair of hands under my shoulders help to lift me to my feet. I latched onto the person and did my best to cooperate

but my legs felt wobbly. Galen steadied me and lifted my right arm to hang over his shoulders before setting off at a slow and steady pace. I kept my eyes closed and focused on breathing to stave off any more waves of nausea. If I had lost the fight then the least I could do was win the battle to keep what little of my dignity I had left.

"I swear if you throw up on me I will kick your ass, Shepard." I couldn't see Galen's face but I knew by the tone of his voice that he was trying not to laugh at my predicament.

Unwilling to let that threat go by unchallenged I mumbled just loud enough for him to hear "Someone already beat you to it."

He snorted and shifted my weight a bit "No shit. You got fucked up."

I groaned, my face starting to feel swollen, but the inquisitive part of me spoke before I could think better of it "How bad was it?"

Galen grunted and I could feel him shake his head "I thought you got him good with the knee strike. DI Ellison was about to call it when you took the fifth punch though. I think everyone was surprised you knocked him off balance. That's a big fucking dude."

Well that wasn't so bad. I felt pleased that maybe my efforts weren't a total loss but Galen brought me right back out of orbit. "He still knocked your ass out. You were out of it for a while. Maybe twenty seconds. Then you woke up and blinking around like you didn't know where you were. You even mumbled 'fuck the what' when DI Ellison asked you if you were okay the first time. And then you puked."

Okay. Maybe it was pretty bad. I grumbled at my failure to beat Prabhu, "Asshole hits like a runaway eezo freighter."

Galen nodded and laughed "I swear he's half krogan. There's no way he's fully human."

My eyes opened at that remark and I glanced at Galen. It's like he read my mind. "That's what I keep thinking. Either that or he's a small jiralhanae."

Galen chuckled at my remark and then went silent. He seemed to be pondering my thoughts while we walked in silence "You think he's the kid of some Spartan?"

Now it was my turn to be contemplative. I had never really thought about that possibility before. The Spartans had been around since before the Contact War nearly a hundred years ago. And you never really heard about what happened to them once they left service. Or if they ever did. I mean, what does a genetically and cybernetically enhanced super soldier do once they become a civilian? And could they even have kids?

That would definitely explain people like Dahlia and Prabhu.

But before I could mull over that another wave of nausea hit me and I closed my eyes to resume my battle to avoid vomiting again. Mostly because I didn't want to lose every fight today. So I went back to

focusing on breathing and counting the steps as Galen assisted me in reaching the medics.

* * *

><p>UNSC Training Facility Three, Omsk Oblast, Russian Federal Republic, Earth, Sol System, Orior Cluster; November 4th, 2572 [Standardized Terran Calendar], 1122 [Local Time, Terran Standard]

"_Cessation request granted. Training simulation routine terminated. Neural sync offline. Weapons offline. Gathering telemetry data. Processing. Analyzing data. Processing. Collating data. Processing. Review complete. Scenario incomplete. 18% chance of successful completion. 82% chance of UNSC casualties. Scenario fail. Transcribing to appropriate records."_

The holographic settings of a remote mining facility crawling with insurrectionists faded away into the drab gray metal walls of the war games training facility. Like the rest of my squad I yanked off my helmet in frustration. My face felt abnormally warm and I wasn't sure it was from the hours of exertion or my simmering temper. I was exhausted and hungry with a healthy dose of frayed nerves. We'd been running this simulation all morning and our progress was nonexistent. Well that's not completely accurate. We were showing great progress in finding new and interesting ways to fuck up.

A deep breath to fill my lungs with something beside the filtered and recycled air of my rebreather came with the unwelcome faint smell of burnt ozone from the repeated firing of mass accelerators. It tickled my throat and nose, which lead to an involuntary clearing of the thick coating of phlegm there. Which only reminded me of another reason to be disgruntled. The platoon had been woken this up this morning after spending the previous eighteen hours in cryosleep. It was our introduction to the process and given that first experience I wasn't looking forward to doing it ever again.

I'd had a strong reaction to the chemical cocktail resulting in excessive mucus production upon thawing. It required some minor medical attention but nothing like the horror stories you heard about. The allergic reactions with inflamed respiratory tracts making it impossible to breath or debilitating full body rashes. Then there were the thawing mistakes that lead to deep tissue damage with painful blisters or extensive neurological damage. I'd definitely gotten off easy, but I was still pretty miserable.

"This is fucking bullshit."

I rolled my eyes. That would be the other thorn in my side this morning. Damian Finch. We were all having a bad morning, but Finch was making it even more unbearable with his typical attitude. I glanced his way with narrowed eyes, taking in his brash and defiant posture. He held his shotgun loosely in one hand, muzzle pointed towards the ground, as he gazed at the rest of the squad with a derisive and almost challenging look on his tan face. The tattoos that adorned most of his muscular frame combined with a permanent intimidating scowl and criminal past to make him a menacing person to deal with. And he knew it.

Before I could speak up the blue tinted holographic image of DI

Ellison materialized. The expression she wore made me cringe involuntarily. "What was your initial indication something was amiss, Recruit Finch?"

Finch said nothing. He averted his gaze from DI Ellison to the floor beneath his boots, sufficiently cowed and fearful of our instructor. Even the digital apparition of her was enough to instill a healthy level of self preservation.

Hologram DI Ellison paced a short distance, waiting for an answer. When none came, she stopped and let it rip. "So I can safely assume that was just conjecture on your part? Because I have been in the unfortunate position of watching your lamentable performances all morning long and I'd say 'fucking bullshit' is fairly apt. You reprobates have undoubtedly been under the auspices of the heathen deity of fucking bullshit and she smiles upon you."

When her ire was directed at me I could swear the blue eyes of her hologram were no less terrifying as the real thing. "Recruit Shepard. As squad leader I expect and demand that you do more than just be a passive participant in this epic masterpiece of blunders. Fix this, or I will find a more competent and proactive squad leader."

I nodded, my face stern after the dressing down I had received. "Understood, Drill Instructor."

She glared at us all one last time before terminating the connection, leaving her hologram to distort slightly and then vanish into the ether.

With her gone all eyes turned to me and I felt my nerves ratchet up under the expectant gazes. When I had made the decision to distinguish myself I had never anticipated that would come with the additional responsibilities of being a squad leader. My only qualification was being the best recruit in the platoon, or at least doing my best to attain that position. But I wasn't a leader and it showed.

"Okay." I cringed in embarrassment as my voice cracked, earning a few chuckles from the squad at my expense. Clearing my throat and schooling my features I tried my best adopt a more commanding presence. "So, uh, you guys heard DI Ellison. We have to do better."

The squad remained unresponsive and unimpressed at my words. I stood there, feeling like an idiot as the seconds of silence ticked by.

"This is still fucking bullshit." Finch broke the awkward quiet with more of his characteristic grating commentary.

"Funny that you found your voice now that the DI is gone." Galen's reply was quick and biting. If there was one person who wasn't the least bit threatened by Finch it was Galen. In fact his mere presence had the exact opposite reaction in Galen since they met on the transport between Reach and Earth. Which I suppose made sense. Galen himself had come from the same sort of poverty and adversity that produced criminal hard cases like Finch.

Finch's deeply tan asian features erupted into a smirk as he

attempted and failed to subdue his pleasure in getting a reaction with his favorite sparring partner. "DI Ellison is in charge. Shep ain't."

My instincts flared up at Finch's disrespect and the impending meltdown between the two. After a fruitless and frustrating morning of training, tempers were running hot and patience was in short supply. If I didn't do something now we'd be dealing with worse problems than failing today's training. Taking a step in Finch's direction I got into his personal space to get his attention and stared him down. "DI Ellison placed me in charge and until she decides to replace me that's how it's going to stay."

Finch took a step back to put some distance between us. His brown eyes narrowed as he sized me up in light of my new found aggressiveness and authority, but slowly nodded before trying to retain some of his arrogant swagger. "Whatever you say, Squad Leader Elvis."

The squad was silent in the awkward aftermath as Finch and I glared at each other with venom. My eyes drifted to the rest of the squad and I lost a bit of my fire, a bit unsure about my actions given their response. Again the gnawing of doubt crept into my mind as I contemplated how ill equipped I was at leading. I couldn't even keep one unruly loudmouth jackass in line.

Barrera, a tall woman from Reach with an olive complexion and short mousy brown hair cleared her throat. As leader of the second fire team she was something akin to my assistant, but she seemed just as uncomfortable with the responsibility of leadership. Normally gregarious and confident, the toll of the day had sapped her positive outlook into a haggard and surly appearance. "So what are we going to do?"

"It should be pretty simple. Some of us need to quit fucking up." Kekoa, a tall and strikingly handsome young man from Elysium, voiced his thoughts on the matter.

At the far end of the squad a Shih, a lithe and athletic young woman who regularly trounced the platoon in footraces, took offense to Kekoa's remarks. Her voice raised as her indignation poured forth in her recriminations. "And you're putting yourself at the top of the list of people fucking up, right?"

That opened the floodgates holding back tempers as everyone got in the act of assigning blame with heated and contentious yelling. Instead of coming together when we most needed it we were crumbling apart.

Watching the dissolving situation with an air of defeat and a frown, I tried to recall the dozen or so attempts we had run so far today. It was the same scenario every time but we'd yet to even complete it. Which wasn't that hard to understand given that we were suffering from a variety of limitations and obstacles. The most obvious being our novice status as infantry soldiers but I doubted DI Ellison much cared for what she would call excuses. Still, our inexperience showed and I had to wonder just what she hoped to have us learn by continually pushing ourselves against this wall? Was it perseverance? Self reliance? Teamwork? Attention to detail? Problem solving? Learning from failure?

Glancing to the high metal ceiling of the war games facility as the arguments grew more vociferous, I mulled over if I was overthinking this. If we all were. Maybe that was it? Since arriving at MVC we'd gone through a barrage of training drills that reinforced and expanded upon what we'd already learned in UCMT. We should trust in that training and just do our jobs.

Looking back at my bickering squad that answer seemed simple. Almost too simple. If it was so simple then why was it eluding us?

Observing the strife continue as the seconds ticked by I wondered why DI Ellison or the staff for the War Games facility had yet to step in? Not that I wanted to have to deal with that additional headache, but it was curious. It's not like they didn't know what was going on right now.

And then I was overcome with an epiphany. Everything about our training was planned, scheduled, and monitored. Down to what we ate and when we ate it. It wasn't a coincidence that we'd gone through our first experience with cryosleep today. They had even warned us that it took a while to become accustomed to the process and after effects. So why schedule our first time in War Games on the same day?

The only thing I could think of was that they wanted us irritable and unable to focus. They wanted to see how we dealt with that adversity. How we would respond when everything went wrong. If we could rely upon our training when nothing else worked.

Now that I realized what was eluding us I got annoyed. Really annoyed.

"Knock it off!" If the volume and heat in my voice even shocked me then it left my squad stunned. But now that I had their full attention I returned my furious gaze to Barrera I and answered her question honestly. "What we're going to do is forget every stupid and annoying thing we've been through today, Griz. None of us are experts at this and we shouldn't get upset with ourselves over that. We're here to learn and show what we've learned."

Pacing in front of them as the frustration made me increasingly irritable I pointed in the general direction of where I thought the control room was located in the facility with an accusatory finger. "They set us up to fail to see how we would respond to the challenge."

Placing my helmet on and pulling out my Harrier assault rifle for dramatic effect, I drawled acerbically through my voice module. "We already know what to do. So let's show them what we've learned and how we respond to challenges."

And after my little rousing and passionate speech the squad's reaction was to remain unmoved and unimpressed. Awesome. That's a real confidence booster. They looked to each other with apathetic expressions and shrugged. Slowly they followed my example, donning their helms and pulling out weapons.

We walked back to the starting location and aligned ourselves into

our team configurations. When I saw everyone was ready I called out to the War Games VI, "First squad ready for training simulation to commence."

"_Request acknowledged. Preparing simulation. Telemetry systems check passed. Neural systems check passed. Communication systems check passed. Weapon systems check passed. Armor systems check passed. Sensory systems check passed. Simulation prepared. Telemetry sync online. Neural sync online. Weapons online. Simulation begins in ten terran seconds. Good luck, recruits."_

The interior visor of my helmet was overlaid with a visual simulation of the training scenario environment. My senses were assaulted with false information fed into my armor's various sensors and the neural interface implant in the base of my skull. For all intents and purposes I believed I was just outside of a private mining facility in the midst of a lush tropical rainforest. The simulation was so engrossing that as the rain fell at a steady clip I could feel and hear every drop as it 'hit' my armor, leaving rivulets of water across my faceplate.

With a hand signal I gave the order for the squad to advance. Our organized movements were fluid and cautious as we scythed through the thinning trees and undergrowth as we neared our destination. Barrera called for a halt as she and her team probed the cleared perimeter around the facility.

While we waited my mind wandered off, contemplating how it was possible for my mind to reconcile the fact that I knew none of this was real despite everything else confirming it as reality. It wasn't really any different than a regular simulstim I suppose, but I'd never really stopped to think about it before. My armored boot covered foot wasn't actually sinking into a muddy and vegetation covered quagmire even though it felt spongy and slick. This floor was solid metal plates with no give.

In a moment of uncanny familiarity, a soft chime alerted me to my motion tracker and IFF tagging a handful of hostile forces to my right at thirty meters. Turning my head in that direction I couldn't make out anything in the rain soaked thicket, but I wryly expected a flock of moa to come surging out. Switching to my other passive scanning I could make out four targets that roughly coincided with what the motion and IFF trackers found.

Snorting to myself, I motioned to Barrera that I would take my squad around to flank these attackers before they could attack us. Barrera's squad spread out and dug in, ready to deal with the Innies patrol and any reinforcements from the facility. We moved quickly and quietly, circling around area where our quarry lay.

Feeling comfortable with our positioning, I motioned to the team to get ready and prepared a training grenade. Switching my suit's sensors from passive scanning to active, I was bathed in a wealth of information on my surroundings that was quickly relayed to my squad via our internal network.

My aggressive scans seemed to have shocked the targets as they scrambled upon realizing they had been flanked. Or the VI running the opposition simulated a human reaction to shock. Whatever.

"Frag out!" I tossed the grenade into their loose formation and shouldered my assault rifle. The simulated forest shuddered and shook from the simulated detonation. Vercesci's kinetic barriers even flared, the sensors reacting to feigned data supplied by the training scenario of debris from the simulated explosion.

The rounds leaving our weapons, however, were not imaginary. Training weapons like this were reconfigured to present a lesser threat by firing special projectiles cut from a soft material ammo blocks at greatly reduced velocities. Of course all those safety measures did not translate into pleasant. They still hurt, as I had learned when DI Ellison had fired upon us during training our second day here.

Although I doubt the opposition VI or the mechs it operated cared much about that as my team erupted in a volley of reduced lethality. The low background thunder of the rain as it pounded across the leaves of the jungle faded into nothing as the fusillade shredded the four targets. Flashes of defeated kinetic barriers glowing indigo and gold were the only signs of resistance.

We pressed forward on their position as more small arms fire echoed in the distance. Finding nothing but dead innies and enough of the surrounding vegetation ripped apart to make several salads I contacted Barrera over the comms, "Dhole One Bravo, we've dealt with the patrol. What's your status?"

"Dhole One Alpha, Three targets exited facility. We have them whittled down. Swing around from your direction and so you can cover our advance on the entrance." Her reply was quick and terse compared to the cacophony of exchanged staccato automatic fire punctuated by solitary louder booms created by powerful semiautomatic weapons and explosives.

Rolling out of the treeline I could see bravo team had wrapped up with their targets and were ready to move on with infiltrating the facility itself. As we provided overwatch, Barrera lead her team in a quick approach until they were stacked at the entrance. Bringing up her omnitool she ran the standard issue hacking software suite on the locking mechanism.

Bright red shifted to lurid green signaling a successful decryption. The door slid open and Kuang, who had been nearest, lobbed a grenade in the entryway. "Flashbang out!"

The reactive countermeasures built into my armor responded to the threat of the stun device as the air rippled and heaved with the activation. My HUD experienced a slight hiccup of static distortion before powering down and rebooting due to the close proximity of the simulated low scale EMP. My faceplate polarized as rapid pulses of light coming from the open entrance created a strobe effect meant to blind or cause seizures. A piercing and shrill sound emitted by the grenade was muted to my ears thanks to the auditory suite filtering external sources.

Having waited a second for the device to activate and incapacitate the defenders, Azevedo sprang into action. She moved past Kekoa and into the facility, shotgun raised and at the ready. Her shotgun echoed thunderously as Kekoa was hot on his heels followed by the rest of the squad.

Seeing bravo team enter I motioned for my team to move forward. We stacked quickly around the entrance and waited for the okay to advance. As the roars came to an abrupt stop Barrera's voice sounded over the comms. "Dhole One Alpha, all clear."

I brought up the building schematics on my HUD to figure out our next move. The one variable in this scenario was that the simulation changed the layout of the facility interior. Seeing the two main paths to take I made my decision quickly and relayed it to the squad, "Bravo will take the charlie two and living quarters. Alpha will head to the hangar and entrance to the mine."

We moved deeper into the facility, Barrera and her team taking a right at the branching corridor. My team advanced warily down the poorly illuminated hallway, clearing offices, labs, and storage rooms on our way towards the large hangar and motor pool for the mining equipment. I kept a nervous eye on my various sensor readouts, looking for signs of more threats. We'd been ambushed several times in situations like this during previous runs.

And this time was no different. Just as my motion detector picked up movement a door up ahead slid open unexpectedly releasing two insurrectionists that stormed out with fire from pistols. Galen's kinetic barrier crackled and collapsed, painting the dull walls of the facility in gold and indigo, as he recoiled with a grunt from taking the brunt of their attacks. Shih's shotgun belched twice in the close quarters, pelting the two simulated Innies with a barrage of small shavings.

Before the bodies even hit the floor two more doors opened and four of their compatriots appeared. They fired upon us from the safety of the doorways with pistols and submachine guns as we sought cover of our own. Shih grabbed Galen by the rear collar of his armor and dragged him into an alcove.

Sensing that we were facing yet another failure I became desperate. Frowning as a radical thought entered my mind, I looked over my shoulder at Vercesi and yelled over the din of exchanging mass accelerator fire. "Cover me!"

He lifted his Typhoon light machine gun without complaint and unleashed a storm of slugs. I dropped to my knees and leaned out from cover to get a good view of our opposition. Sizing them up quickly I raised my right hand and blocked out all distractions as I drew upon my biotics. Hours of drills and frustration paid off as I placed a lowered mass field perfectly in one of the doorways. In the back of my mind I had an appreciation for the VI's quick adjustment of the simulation to account for the mass effect field I had introduced. The two unfortunate attackers were lifted off their feet from the lowered mass of the field and tossed into a spin from the recoil produced by their weapons. My head swam and vision doubled as my heart felt like a fluttering hammer in my chest but I held.

That resolve gave my team the opportunity they needed to regroup. Vercesi and Finch made quick work of the two Innies under the influence of a mass effect field. I released the field with a relieved sigh and the corpses fell awkwardly. Pushing myself up to get on my feet I was forced to lean against the wall as a bout of dizziness overtook me.

Vercesi used his left forearm to pin me against the wall and prevent me from falling face first into the hallways. He peered at me queerly, questioning my well being through his voice module. "You okay, Luis?"

I closed my eyes and breathed deeply to will away the nausea. Given the times I'd used my biotics this morning I was willing to bet that I had pushed my limits. Still, the job wasn't done so I had to push on. Slowly nodding I wheezed out my reply, "Yeah."

Giving me a playful slap up against my helmet, Vercesi left me to stand on my own power and stepped out of the alcove. Gaining my bearings, I looked around and was pleasantly surprised to see that the team had come through relatively unscathed. Aside from my own biotic induced near fainting spell, only Galen had been hit. He was kneeling near Shih, gingerly working his left shoulder through various motions to test for mobility. The squad status update showed the simulation registering a mass accelerator wound to his left shoulder.

I winced, having experienced something similar in my thigh two runs ago. The VI would use your neural interface to fool your body into believing it was injured, complete with pain and limited movement. As Shih helped him to his feet I asked, "You good to go, Galen?"

He nodded once with a quick jerk of his head, grasping his assault rifle in his right hand. I noticed his left arm hung limply at his side as he hissed through his voice module, "I'm good. Let's hurry this the fuck up before I rip this neural implant out."

"Copy that." I nodded back, admiring his grit and dauntlessness. We were all the walking wounded at this point, each sporting multiple sprains and bruising from hits by the soft shavings fired by the training weapons on top of the phantom pains from the simulation.

I gestured for Shih to take point and continue on our path while I contacted Barrera over the comms, "Dhole One Bravo, how are things looking on your end?"

The weariness in her reply was nearly palpable. "Dhole One Alpha, we just cleared the living quarters. They threw a lot at us but we're still standing. Moving on to the charlie two."

"Dhole One Bravo, copy that. Same here. Almost to the hangar. Hang in there."

Upon reaching the entrance to the hangar I had the squad stack up in preparation. Activating the door, I used my assault rifle's linked scope and sensors to survey the room. It was about standard to the other layouts we'd seen. Two Innies on an upper catwalk on the opposite side of the large room. Rows of parked vehicles and industrial mining mechs would provide a great deal of cover for us. Unfortunately, it did the same for the half dozen or so enemy combatants my sensors picked up. I didn't really feel like waltzing into this deathtrap, but I was damned if I was going to run through this simulation again today.

Examining the situation at hand I quickly came up with a game plan, "We're going to create some cover and advance to that shuttle with

omni-shields up. Lifen you got the other shield and go right. Damian go with her. Galen you're with me on the left. Vercesi keep some pressure on those two on the catwalk."

I stowed my assault rifle on the magnetic strips along the back of my armor in favor of the M6 Phalanx sidearm on my right thigh and a screening grenade. Bringing up my omnitool I activated the quick action function, a strong vibration and tingle from the field fabrication unit built into my armor's left vambrace firing up. A massive rectangular shape of an omni-shield materialized, centered and suspended a few centimeters above my left wrist. The bright orange glow in the hallway intensified as my omni-shield was joined by Shih's.

With a nod, I triggered the screening grenade with practiced flick and press of my thumb before I rolled it into the hangar. The grenade activated with a soft pop and hiss, streaming thick white smoke that obscured vision and sensors. I raised my pistol and crouched behind the shield before surging through the doorway, Galen hot on my heels as he valiantly tried to hold his assault rifle with both hands. Shih and Finch mirrored our actions, securing the right end of the shuttle, leaving Vercesi to calmly stalk forward firing on the catwalk.

Two of the Innies tried coming around on the left side, and right into our sights. I fired several shots from my pistol into center mass of the nearest Innie, her flimsy kinetic barriers flaring and popping as my slugs tore through the thin armor. Galen leaned up and over my right shoulder to fire on her companion, but he was unable to hold his aim steady as it went wide to the right.

He swore in rage and pain, the assault rifle slipping out of the grasp of his gimpy left hand. Fortunately, the VI operating the opposition had chosen to have the Innie ignore his precarious position in favor of the ill advised decision to continue advancing and firing upon my omni-shield. The steady bursts from the submachine gun in his hands pelted the shield, leaving me to grunt as the impacts transferred through the fields holding the shield in place and into my left arm. Vercesi ran to our position and unleashed another storm of slugs with his Typhoon just as I adjusted my aim to open fire. And then Galen, having recovered from his earlier mishap, fired his Harrier a split second later.

If this had been real and not a simulation, it might have been a war crime what we did to that Innie.

Without saying a word to one another we realized the folly quickly, all firing coming to a quick halt as we collectively held our breaths observing the realism in the carnage resulting from our handiwork.

"Shit." I nodded dumbly in agreement with Vercesi's shocked utterance.

Galen shook his head and leaned his back against the shuttle, grimacing behind his faceplate, "Well, better him than one of us."

I stopped to ponder that pearl of wisdom. In the midst of this training it was easy at times to forget that this wasn't simply a game we were playing. We were being trained to kill and this is what

that killing would look like. In my mind flashes of Mindoir resurfaced. The dead. The dying. My mother. That batarian I had 'killed' through sheer luck. The asari Ari had torn a chunk out of.

Shoving those thoughts back into the corner I kept them in, I looked over my shoulder and barked out, "How are you guys looking over there?"

My reply was Finch holding up a finger in the commonly understood signal to wait while continuing to aim from the cover of the shuttle. Shih kneeled and leaned out near his feet, her shield protecting them both as her M7 Hurricane fired in precise bursts. After patiently waiting, Finch fired four quick shots from his M392 Saber. Finch rolled back into cover and turned his head towards us, a cocky grin on his face. "Better than you guys. Four Innies down."

Rolling my eyes and standing I jerked my head in the direction of the catwalks. "And our pals up above?"

Shih leaned back into cover and shrugged. "They're not biting. They took some shots at us, but are waiting for us to make the move."

Sighing to myself I contemplated our options. I wasn't about to let us be stymied here. Deactivating the omni-shield and switching out weapons while I thought on what to do. Holding my Harrier in my hands, I drummed my fingers across the attached underslung grenade launcher.

It took a moment for the message to be transmitted from my gauntlet covered fingers to my brain. When it came I froze and quickly shifted my vision to the grenade launcher as a curious frown blossomed on my face.

Well, we'd already gone a bit overkill already. Would a bit more hurt?

Grabbing a launcher grenade from a waistband and loading it, I quickly relayed my thoughts to the team. "If they won't cooperate then we're going to flush them out. Shih, you're going to help shield me while I lob a grenade. Vercesi and Finch will finish them off."

Galen was silent as the rest of the team moved into place. From his position leaning against the shuttle, he cleared his throat and quietly asked, "What do you want me to do?"

My eyes involuntarily drifted to his shoulder, but I grinned in a friendly way, trying to soften the blow, "You've already done enough, man."

He deflated and nodded, knowing the real reason that I had left unspoken.

But of course Finch, unrepentant asshole that he was, had to go and say it explicitly. And much more unpleasantly. "Yeah, you already did your job as a meat shield. Thanks for taking one for team, C-Urchin."

I winced and turned to glare in Finch's direction. Galen, despite his injury, looked ready to pounce and slam the stock of his Harrier into the back of Finch's head. It had been a mistake of mine to use Galen's unfortunate UCMT nickname in front of the rest of the squad during our first week here. Although, to be fair to myself, it was done in retaliation as Galen had informed the squad of my own nickname of Elvis.

At this rate DI Bramante would continue haunting my military career for years to come.

Clearing my thoughts once more, I signaled to Shih that I was ready. She leaned out, omni-shield first, to provide cover. Crouching low, I crept out behind her and my sensors identified where the two Innies were hiding just out of our line of sight behind a control station panel on the catwalk. Aiming quickly, I fired the grenade launcher with a solid thwump and kick into my shoulder. Holding the trigger depressed, I kept the grenade inert through the sync with my rifle and HUD.

My aim was better than I had hoped as the grenade hit the wall behind their hiding spot and ricocheted into place perfectly. The Innies dived to either side of the catwalk for safety but it was too late. Releasing the trigger allowed the grenade to activate on it's standard short fuse, exploding almost instantaneously.

The proximity to the high explosive destroyed the console and ripped apart the catwalk itself. With portions of the catwalk removed, the rest of the structure lost integrity and buckled before snapping off. One of the Innies went for this wild ride, holding on as he fell with the section of catwalk for about ten meters. When the breakage slammed into the hangar floor he was bounced from the impact and then impaled through the lower abdomen on a broken handrail.

The other Innie was more fortunate and quickly got to his feet on the barely stable remains of the catwalk. Vercesi and Finch made quick work of him as his corpse took the inevitable tumble off the catwalk.

The impaled Innie squirmed and writhed, making me look away and curse the programmers of these simulations under my breath. The attention to detail on things like this was almost stomach churning. Even if it was important that we learn to face these realities now in training with simulated individuals it was still barbaric to behold.

Shih stood, shaking her head, and glancing at the rest of us helplessly. "What do we do with him? Are we supposed to render aid?"

Finch calmly raised his marksman rifle and fired a shot into the simulated Innie's skull. The mass accelerated slug punched a hole through the upper jaw on one side and out the back of his head on the other. The gore of simulated brain matter that flew out behind the slug carried the imaginary life out of the Innie as he ceased in his squirming and fell limp.

"Fuck!" Vercesi exclaimed in shock and then stared at Finch in revulsion. "What the fuck is wrong with you, Finch?"

Glaring at him coolly, Finch sneered and contemptuously replied,

"Putting him out of his misery, you whiny little bitch."

"_Training simulation routine terminated. Scenario successfully completed. Neural sync offline. Weapons offline. Gathering telemetry data. Processing. Analyzing data. Processing. Collating data. Processing. Review complete. 87% efficiency score. 11% chance of UNSC casualties. Scenario pass. Transcribing to records."_

The budding argument was interrupted before it ever really started by the simulation ending. The surroundings of the hangar distorted and faded away, revealing the cavernous and bland training room.

An almost obscene sounding sigh of relief coming from Galen echoed in the quiet room, leading the entire squad to turn and look at him in amusement. He had ripped off his helmet and was grinning maniacally as he swung his previously injured shoulder in glee.

Bravo team sauntered our way, removing their helmets and enjoying Galen's theatrics. Azevedo chuckled, prodding him with a quip over his response. "Are you that happy we finally won?"

The team laughed but Galen's joy wasn't the least bit dented. I took off my helmet and gave a bit of explanation. "He took a shot to his shoulder halfway through. Simulation was playing havoc on his neural interface."

Bravo squad winced as one, appreciating his ecstasy and relief now.

"Then he's been taught an invaluable lesson. Errors and miscalculations in even the most routine engagements can have excruciating consequences."

DI Ellison's blue tinged life sized avatar had returned, hands behind her back as she studiously observed us. Her head turned towards Galen with some concern, "Copacetic, recruit?"

Adopting a more serious expression, Galen nodded, "Good to go, Drill Instructor."

"Excellent. Recruit Shepard?" I looked to her hologram in confusion, not sure what she was asking. She sighed in annoyance, gesturing towards my neck for clarification, "Your vital signs showed duress from biotics use."

Oh. I nodded, feeling pretty good now. Well, relatively speaking. I was feeling pretty weak and sleepy, but nothing serious. "Doing fine after I've had a moment to catch my breath, Drill Instructor."

Her avatar eyed me pensively for a moment before nodding, "Way to show fortitude and respond to the challenges, recruit. You'll be put on light duty regardless as a safety precaution. Your performance today warrants it." She turned to the rest of the squad with a faint smile. "All of you. The overwhelming majority of squads fail this day of training. As designed."

We perked up at the praise, feeling a bit better about this positive spin to the end of our miserable morning. Returning back to her all business personality after that rare moment of genuine emotion, DI Ellison informed us of what we had in store for the rest of the day.

"Hit the barracks and change out of your armor. The MCU is the expected dress for the rest of the day. You have until thirteen hundred to have a meal and return to classroom nine in educational hall with datapad and stylus. Block of instruction will be your introduction into combating species that are not current signatories of the Citadel Charter. Namely krogans, batarians, quarians, and vorchas. Kig-yar and jiralhanae will be covered in their non Covenant capacity as well. Any questions?"

My eyes shifted towards the rest of the squad, pleading with them to say no, but it was not meant to be. Vercesi looked hesitant chewing on his lip as he internally debated voicing something.

The question in his mind won as he raised his hand and cleared his throat. When DI Ellison acknowledged him with a glance his way and a nod, he cautiously asked, "Drill Instructor, will we always be running sims where we fight and kill other humans?"

She folded her arms and stared at him with narrowed eyes. Not quite angry, but definitely not at all amused with the implications of his questions. The squad had learned early on that Vercesi was outspoken in his support for Terra Firma and it's pro human stance. Which wasn't that far removed from some of the rhetoric of the insurrectionists. Having spent the morning going through sim after sim where we shot up Innies probably left a bad taste in his mouth.

After scrutinizing him for a moment, DI Ellison spoke clearly and carefully, "Your training includes combating other races as per your block of instruction this afternoon."

He swallowed nervously, nodding at her answer and replying. "Thank you, Drill Instructor."

Continuing to stare at him, she asked a probing question of her own, "Do you feel conflicted about being asked to fight other humans, recruit? Think it contradicts your oath to defend humanity?" Vercesi hesitated before breaking eye contact with DI Ellison, shaking his head in the negative. DI Ellison's hologram stood taller, glaring at the rest of the squad, "And the rest of you? Any qualms?"

I shook my head no along with the rest as an instinctive response, but upon closer internal reflection I was slightly concerned about killing another human. Or anyone. And then I was troubled to find that somehow that batarian on Mindoir didn't 'count' in my memories.

The avatar of DI Ellison nodded before explaining the ethical quandary we faced. "If any of you feel strongly about these topics then your vote for Terra Firma counts just as much as any other citizen's. But as someone who witnessed the tail end of the latest insurrection war and has since crossed paths with Innies, allow me to educate you on this matter. Insurrectionists are not misunderstood. They are not tragic revolutionaries or romantic rebels fighting against a tyrant state. They are capricious ideologues who can't abide the political process. Their twisted vision of freedom and liberty is spoken in the language of violence against the public to induce fear and compliance when they do not get their way. This and much more makes them loathsome cowards. We can debate policy and law on Arcturus until our faces are more blue than an asari holding her breath, but no matter the differences we remain civil in this

discussion. When insurrectionists choose to remonstrate it is against the public with mass accelerated slugs and explosions."

Pausing to let her words sink in, DI Ellison took returned her attention to Vercesi, but spoke aloud to address the whole squad. "The primary duties of the UNSC are to secure and defend Systems Alliance interests. In that capacity we ensure that our domestic failings do not spill over into the rest of Citadel Space. That inevitably will lead to confrontations with insurrectionists."

Vercesi nodded, but it was obvious to see his face harbored the shadow of a scowl. It didn't go unnoticed by DI Ellison either, who stared at him one last time before dismissing our squad. "Return to the barracks, recruits. Dismissed. And Recruit Shepard?"

I had already began eagerly walking away when my name was called. Grunting in annoyance I spun around and took two quick bounding steps to place myself front and center. DI Ellison's avatar gestured again to my neck before her hologram disappeared, "Report to the clinic for a biotic physical. I will not have a recruit dying on me this afternoon."

Nodding in acceptance, I waited until her avatar was gone to blow out a breath in frustration. Looks like I would be having to rush through my meal to still make it back in time for this afternoon's classroom training.

Jogging to catch up with the squad as they exited the War Games training room I overhead the bickering starting again. This time Barrera and Vercesi debating the finer points of Arcturus politics. I supposed that I would need to intervene at some point before things got out of hand. I hung my head and questioned my sanity in accepting the squad leader position. There was no way I was cut out to do this.

* * *

><p>UNSC Training Facility Three, Omsk Oblast, Russian Federal Republic, Earth, Sol System, Orior Cluster; November 9th, 2572 [Standardized Terran Calendar], 1943 [Local Time, Terran Standard]

I stifled a groan as my attempt at a biotic warp attack missed the evading drone by nearly half a meter.

After spending all day in drills and sims to familiarize ourselves with the various weapons used by forces in the Terminus I was exhausted. In fact I probably shouldn't even be out here in front of the barracks squeezing in some extra time doing biotic drills but I was determined to improve all of my skills.

"_Time has expired. Evaluation failure. Transcribing to records."_

I could feel the heat of my emotions and biotic exertions rapidly cooling off in the evening air, leaving me chilled and uncomfortable. I angrily swatted at my omnitool to dismiss the haptic interface while glaring at the drone as it slowly descended to the floor and deactivated.

"Shouldn't you be better at this?"

Looking over my shoulder I transferred that glare to Galen who sat on a bench polishing his boots and getting a free show watching me test my biotics.

"Shouldn't you be bothering someone else?" My response was biting but I wasn't angry with him. My failure to concentrate and complete this evaluation was on me. I was still having some issues with reliably summoning some of the basic mass effect fields in a quick manner and on target.

Hefting the weight of the drone as I retrieved it I was tempted to toss it as hard as I possibly could against a wall just to gain some satisfaction from seeing it shatter. It might make me feel better but I doubt DI Ellison would be amused when she asked me why the biotic test drone was missing from its storage case.

Eager to win this round of our sarcastic banter, Galen narrowed his blue eyes and struck back in a faux affronted rebuke, "Don't get all pissed off at me because your biotic thingy isn't working."

Take a moment to process what he had just said, I paused and stared at him in disgust. Slowly I parried back with a helpful reminder and finger wag in his direction, "Seriously, never talk about my biotic thingy again. Ever."

He gaped slightly, realizing the implications of his choice of words. Rolling his eyes when it sunk in, he resumed polishing his boots and grumbled, "Like anyone would ever want to talk about that."

Feeling better I chuckled at his annoyed acceptance of defeat. After placing the drone into its case I dropped down in an exhausted heap on the bench next to him. I gazed up at the brilliant early night sky filled with stars. My tired mind grasped on the obscure thought of how many billions of humans had stared up at this exact same sky before me. For all the hype and reverence of being the birthplace our species, Earth was nothing special. It felt like any other planet, or at least that's how it seemed to me.

But what did I know? All I had seen of this planet so far was a glimpse from one of the transport's large observation decks as we neared the orbital station and a little over two weeks spent in Russia.

"You all right?"

I glanced at Galen who was looking at me concernedly. Nodding and sitting up I rubbed my jaw with the back of my hand as I yawned. My knuckles ran across the prickly stubble covering the flesh of my lower face, reminding me that I would have to shave tomorrow morning. Yet another thing that I never really noticed or had to care about prior to joining the UNSC. Picking up my own pair of boots I joined Galen in silence as we prepared our boots for the next day.

Galen finished with a sigh and stared out across our dark surroundings. "Kind of a letdown, huh?"

Assuming he was referring to my biotic performance I shrugged and resumed polishing my boots as I replied, "I guess. I need to learn to

use my biotics when I'm under stress."

"Not that, although you did suck. Spectacularly." He dismissed me with a grin before continuing his musings. "I was talking about being here. Earth."

Joining him in observing our stark nighttime surroundings at the snow covered UNSC training facility on the Siberian plains I remarked, "Oh. Yeah. Not sure what I was expecting but this wasn't it." Remembering his commentary on my biotics I skewered him with a side glance and snidely added, "Also, fuck you."

Galen brightened at my reaction and chuckled freely, resuming our verbal sparring. "Not even if you paid me a gazillion credits."

Deciding to puncture his little fantasy I snarked, "Your first mistake was believing anyone would actually pay to have sex with you."

His good mood refused to be brought low by reality, "It's going to happen one day."

Staring at him blandly I kept up my deadpan repartee, "Keep dreaming. Even vorchas have standards."

Galen snorted and leaned back on his arms to resume observing the stars with a proud smirk on his face. "I will, and then when Columbia Rios pays me to nail her you'll regret having ever doubted me."

I rolled my eyes and refrained from commenting on the odds his dream woman would even know he existed in favor of getting back to work.

"It's so weird being around only humans." Galen's remark once again broke the silence.

Not quite sure what brought that on I tried to contemplate the meaning behind his statement. If he was gauging time spent around other humans as what we had experienced thus far in the UNSC then this most definitely was weird, by any standards. Curious as to what he meant, I asked, "What do you mean?"

Galen didn't answer at first, his gaze fixated on the heavens above. When he did speak he rambled a bit, "It's the little things. I'm used to interacting with xenos everyday. It never really occurred to me that there were major differences."

Ah. I suppose I could understand his perspective. I grew up on a small, remote, and overwhelmingly human colony. Even in Bekenstein there just wasn't very many xenos. Outside of Milgrom, at least.

But I guess it was to be expected he would have these thoughts after our training today. The armorer who had assisted DI Ellison in explaining the nuances of the typical Terminus arsenal wasn't exactly xeno friendly. Every weapon system or explosive was accompanied with commentary that made derogatory comments about xenos.

Granted he didn't show much love for human insurrectionists either, but his xenophobia bled through in his instruction. I had been more

curious that DI Ellison hadn't stepped in to stop him. Was she a xenophobe too?

After hearing Galen's musings on the thoughts I wondered if the UNSC made people xenophobic given it was inevitable you saw conflict with alien species? Kind of the same way there seemed to be a deep seated hatred of insurrectionists?

I guess you would begin to harbor grudges and hatreds based upon your only experiences with these races or groups being combat.

That thought left me feeling a bit self conscious about my own repressed dislike bordering on hatred for batarians. It also caused me to question another possibility about the UNSC. Maybe this profession just appealed to people who already harbored those feelings and wanted an excuse to kill those they hated? I thought back to DI Bramante's baiting questions in the chamber during our A/X repair eval back on Reach. It had been an obvious attempt to distract the squad from what was going to happen, but his words were still tailored to whittle away at my facade and find the truth there.

If given the chance again, would I kill that batarian on Mindoir? Or would any batarian do?

The fact that I didn't immediately think I would hesitate at the chance to kill any batarian bothered me. I tried rationalizing it as a growing acceptance that a part of my job was going to involve possibly killing people. Given the prevalence of batarians in Terminus piracy or the growing tensions between the Alliance and Hegemony it was almost a guarantee that I would be confronted with this decision in my future.

But then again, so would killing another human. Insurrection was still the number one threat within Systems Alliance space. Vercesi wasn't imagining things when he would talk about how most of the training involved learning how to kill other humans.

Clearing my mind of those sorts of disturbing thoughts I glanced back at Galen and smiled, eager to remove the seriousness of the conversation, "Even elcor?"

Turning his head my way, he grinned lazily and nodded in agreement with my observation. "Okay, so maybe not all xenos are just like humans, but you hardly ever got any elcor down in the Wards. It's mostly asari, salarians, and turians. Some humans and drell. The other races have a hard time living on the Citadel. It's already expensive and their conditions just make that worse."

That made sense, I suppose. Hanar, volus, and elcor all had special requirements to live normally around other races which probably made it not worth the fuss and credits. Still I was a bit more curious about his perspective on xenos and the Citadel, if only to ease my own dread about my reasons for joining the UNSC. "What about other races?"

Galen frowned, his tan features turning into a bit of a snarl at my question, "What? You mean like quarians or krogans and shit?"

I nodded, puzzled by the reversal in his behavior towards xenos once the species in question changed.

He blew out a breath, shrugging and staring up at the sky once again. "Well since none of them are members of the charter they're not allowed to legally reside there. They still show up anyways as travelers. Shit most of them are not supposed to be outside of their quarantine zones, but no one really gives a fuck. The CDEM is a joke the Council trots out so they can claim to be noble protecting species that are not ready to join the galaxy. Some bullshit about non interference in the growth and development of an immature race. All it really means is that the Council feels a species is too violent or volatile for galactic society and the corporations can't find anything of value in their star cluster that can't be found elsewhere. Everyone agrees that they just don't want to have another krogan, quarian, or batarian situation on their hands."

Well that figures. The common perception in Alliance space, even by xeno friendly humans, was that if humanity had not forced a truce following the Contact War we would have been placed under CDEM as well. That we fought back and held our own not only intrigued but terrified the Council.

From there opinions varied widely. Some viewed the diplomatic outreach and offer for inclusion in the Citadel Charter as a sign that the Council viewed humans as a mature and strong race worthy of standing alongside the rest. Those were the optimists. A more darker and distrustful segment of the human race believed that they accepted us into their collective since it was better to have some measure of control over a human society they deemed a potential threat. By turning that threat into an asset for them we had become the next krogan. Easily disposable shock troopers to protect the races that mattered. Those who held that opinion were more in line with Terra Firma and various secessionists groups.

My inquisitive nature latched on to his including quarians in statements about being outside of quarantine zones. "But quarians are not quarantined."

"They're not, but quarians are just like the hanar and the rest. Too many special needs to live comfortably. Plus no one wants them on the Citadel anyways." Galen continued to stare off into the distance, a look of sour displeasure on his face regarding quarians. "Most of the shopkeepers refuse to carry translators with quarian dialects, have sterile environments, or filter food and drinks to prevent easy infections. They go out of their way to be dicks to them."

Now that was a bit of a shock. I wasn't naïve enough to believe everyone got along all the time. My great grandmother Elvira was a perfect example of how people could cling to hate others for superficial and stupid reasons. Or the widespread discrimination of biotics in human culture.

Okay, maybe I am a bit naïve, now that I think about it.

Still, I would have never guessed that people were that hostile towards quarians, despite the less than stellar image of them in the media. "Really? Why? I thought everyone loved Fleet and Flotilla?"

Well, with the possible exception of me. The vid was terrible. I'll never get the memories out of my mind of my mother and sisters

watching and singing along with that vid. Partly because of the nostalgic value of my youth and my mother still being alive. Partly because none of them had a singing voice to brag about.

Galen's eyebrows knitted in confusion and incredulity, "No one gives a fuck about that."

Okay. Looks like my opinion of the vid wasn't as rare as I thought. His features lessened as he slightly corrected his response, tilting his head to the left and shrugging, "I mean, sure, people might want to fuck Shalei, and the rest just like singing along to a sappy love story, but it's just a vid. Whenever a quarian shows up for real on the Citadel everyone just assumes they're thieves looking to steal things. And they're usually not wrong."

His comments about life on the Citadel were illuminating. My aunt and uncle always talked about social issues and race relations since it was a topic they dealt with regularly for their professions, but they never divulged any sort of details about life on the Citadel. At least not this bluntly.

Continuing his explanations unabated, Galen moved on to listing the other races. "And well, shit, no one likes batarians, so only a masochist batarian would choose to come to the Citadel much less live there. Krogan are bad news because they can't keep themselves from picking fights with people. Every once in a while one comes through but most places won't rent or sell anything to a krogan unless they pay a matriarch's ransom." He snorted and shook his head before continuing, more amused than annoyed now. "The other races don't even bother. Vorcha, jiralhanae, and kig-yar that are stupid enough to show up are stopped by C-Sec at customs and turned around. No entrance allowed."

We settled into silence once again as I digested what he had to say. This was educational, in a way. I still had no clue how this all fit into the greater holo of the galaxy, but I had more important things to worry about. Like finishing the job of polishing these boots so I could get some sleep.

Having been lost in his own silent musings, Galen turned to me with a question of his own. "So how does this compare to living on other planets?"

That threw me for a loop. Glancing out across the faint silhouettes of the buildings of TF3 under the light of stars and the moon left me feeling underwhelmed by Earth. I shrugged in response, "I don't know. It's colder than I expected."

He blew out a large breath, staring at the faint wisps of vapor that formed curiously, "Yeah. That's something I wasn't ready for. Seasons. Weather."

I broke into a fit of giggles as I recalled his reactions during the first week of UCMT. "That's right. You almost freaked out when it rained that first time on Reach."

Galen's countenance soured as he sulked and grumbled, "Go fuck yourself, Shepard."

"What's happening?" I mockingly pantomimed his reaction from memory

before dissolving into a deeper bout of laughter upon seeing his embarrassed glare. Taking in large breaths I continued to prod him and his lack of understanding of weather, "You started panicking that the atmosphere of the planet had been compromised."

Taking umbrage with my teasing, Galen defended his actions earnestly "How the hell was I supposed to know? I grew up on the Citadel. The atmo is the same every day. Same temperature. Same moisture."

I nodded in concession, still amused by his antics. Looking out across TF3 once again I was struck by the remote and desolate nature of our location. Humming at my observation, I remarked "This place is kinda bizarre."

Galen's surliness melted into a curious frown at my statement. I cleared my throat and clarified, "There's something like fifteen billion people on Earth and there are still wide open expanses of wilderness like this where you won't see a soul for kilometers."

Shrugging at my explanation, Galen remarked dismissively "The cities are probably densely populated like the Wards."

Even if that was true it was still pretty hard to believe. "Maybe all of the arcologies make it easier but it's still pretty crazy to think about. This is our homeworld and there's no one here."

"Yeah, I guess it is." Galen leaned forward placing his elbows on his knees and toed some of the snow at our feet before glumly replying, "Kinda hard to imagine our ancestors came from this place."

My mind drifted back to thoughts of Mindoir and my family, specifically the times spent at the beach. "Well the parts near the equator have to be much warmer."

Galen sat up straight and brightened as he dreamed of a warmer future, "I cannot wait until I can take my first trip on leave. I am visiting someplace warm with a beach and no dress code."

Unable to resist the opportunity to destroy his fantasy, I shook my head disapprovingly and reminded him, "If there's no dress code that means everyone has to see you too." Once he sharply turned his head my way I faked disappointment to mock him further, "Why would you ruin people's vacations like that?"

He sneered and tilted his head arrogantly, "The only way I'll ruin it because everyone will be jealous of me and my smoking hot body."

"Being burned to a crisp because of how pale as you are doesn't really count as smoking hot." My assault on Galen's ego continued, much to his chagrin. Deciding to give him a bit of a break I reflected on those recently resurfaced memories of Mindoir, "I really miss being a kid and going to the beach. Me and my sisters would play in the water or mom would help us build sand castles."

Galen went uncharacteristically quiet, his eyes downcast, "What about your dad?"

Still oblivious to Galen's change in demeanor, my face broke into a

large smile at his question. "He would usually toss us around in the water. Mom would always yell at him for doing it but we would turn around and beg him to do it again when she wasn't paying attention." A laugh bubbled forth as another aspect of our family trips to the beach was remembered, "If mom came close enough to the water he would grab her and toss her in, too."

The memory replayed in my mind of mom resurfacing, spurting out sea water and moving the wet hair hanging like a damp curtain from in front of her face. She would glare and berate him and he would laugh, enveloping her in his arms. She would lose her indignation and melt into his embrace were they would share a private moment kissing under the heat of Malawi. Just like any other happy couple on the beach.

That is until their three bratty children began making gagging sounds and yelling 'gross!' at seeing their parents make out.

My heart clenched at the memory of better times before their marriage went sour and Terminus pirates showed up to put it out of its misery.

I glanced back at Galen to find him looking pensive. Sensing my eyes on him, he looked up and gave me a wan smile, "That sounds awesome. If I ever have kids I'm going to do that with them."

Uncomfortable with the knowledge of how that ended up for my parents, I shrugged and chose to deflect the situation with more humor, "You have to find a woman stupid enough to have kids with you first."

My tactic work as Galen lost his melancholy, rolling his eyes and blithely remarking, "That's the easy part. The hard part is sticking around for your kid."

Freezing at his remark, I was suddenly keenly aware of not only how it related to my parents, but Galen's. He'd never gone into details, but he had explained once how he came to be a duct rat. His parents broke up before he was ever born, leaving Galen's mother to seek a fresh start and new job opportunity on the Citadel during the latter stages of her pregnancy. Galen's father had never been in the picture, having disappeared into the Terminus and never being heard from again. Galen's mother, Aruna Kemp, would fail to come home from work one day, leaving an eight year old Galen on his own.

Wincing at my lack of tact I desperately tried to apologize. "Shit. I'm sorry."

Waving off my concerns, Galen remained upbeat and shrugged, his determination to transcend his heartbreaking origins shining through. "Don't worry about it. I know my parents were dicks. I'm going to be better than they were." He chuckled darkly and shook his head, finding black humor in his situation, "It's not like I have to try very hard to do that. In fact all I have to do is show up and stick around to have them beat."

Eager to change the subject to something less stressful, I wondered about his future plans. "You thinking of going back to the Citadel after you're done?"

Galen quirked his lips in thought, "I don't know. Now that I'm all

official and shit I have to legally apply for residency." He sighed and shook his head at the absurd situation surrounding his legal status, "Ain't that a bitch? Born there and spent all eighteen years of my life there but I'm not allowed to come back home."

Dismissing the entire process as possibly not worth the effort, Galen replied to his own thoughts, "Aw fuck it. I'll probably just meet some human girl and follow her back home to her planet. My kids should probably grow up on a planet around other humans anyways."

Nodding along, I recalled he had some issues during UCMT about his Systems Alliance citizenship. Something about not having any records for his teen years being a flag. "How's your citizenship going?"

Blowing out a frustrated breath, he exasperatedly replied, "It got worked out. Since both my parents were UNSC citizens on record I don't have to go through the provisional status. I'm registered as a Spacer now until I decide to apply for residency with a planet."

Finding some familiarity in our situations, I began contemplating my own future since I was a bit lost and unsure what was going to happen. I know I was dead set on proving myself worthy of the inevitable attempt to recruit me for ICT because of my biotics, but there was no guarantee I passed the training. And if I did fail, then what? Leave the UNSC and do what? Where would I go? What would I do? I sighed and rubbed my face tiredly, "I have no idea what I'm going to do."

Galen looked at me curiously and queried, "Not going home to Mindoir?"

Shrugging, I answered honestly. "I've thought about it. My official records have me as a citizen of Bekenstein. I'd have to reapply for Mindoir and since it's still in the colonial phase there are all sorts of extra hoops I'd have to jump through to qualify."

The CAA was very thorough in screening prospective colonists and investors in a bid to avoid tax evasion schemes, insurrectionists, organized crime, or any other potential threat to the future of a colony. For all the good that did. Old man Sprague being a prime example.

I'd looked into the application process for Mindoir during the last week of UCMT, only to learn I would have to purchase a large plot of land and requisite materials to run an active farm or business for citizenship and permanent residency. Lacking both the funds and time to do so I was stuck with waiting for the colonial process to end and applying for residency the old fashioned way, or saving up all my pay and moving there upon the end of my enlistment.

So basically it was something for me to consider far off in the future.

Looking thoughtful, Galen nodded and asked, "What about your sisters?"

I snorted at his question and put my boots down having finished

polishing them. There was no chance in hell Lizzy would willingly set foot on Mindoir ever again, and Ari was probably likely to bounce around wherever her dreams of researching biotics took her. "The same. Although I think Lizzy will probably end up here on Earth. Or maybe Arcturus or some other major city in Alliance space. I don't see her ever going back to living on an outer colony."

Galen frowned, trying to feign nonchalance and ignorance, "Which one is Lizzy?"

Eyeing him shrewdly I took a guess as to his motives, but replied anyways. Albeit slowly with narrowed eyes. "My older sister. The one on the other side of the planet right now attending law school."

His face erupted into a devious smile and he wagged his eyebrows suggestively, delighting in my growing scowl. "Oh, that one."

Not amused in the least, I reminded him of what happened the last time everyone made remarks about her, or the rest of my family, by snarling my response, "Don't start."

He leaned back out of my range and smirked, enjoying prodding me on this subject. "What? All I am saying is that the women in your family are very attractive. Especially your sister Lizzy. It's a compliment."

Refreshing his memory that I didn't need to be in range to hurt him, I raised my right fist and let my biotic aura flare. Speaking around the dizziness and tingle flowing through my tired body, I growled, "Keep it up and I'm going to send a warp field right up your ass."

Galen quickly slid out of his seat on the bench and jogged a few paces away before resuming his taunting, "You're not sending anything up my ass with your biotic thingy."

My jaw dropped at his callback to our earlier discussion and I flushed crimson, annoyed and embarrassed to have made the mistake of giving him an opening to twist my words. I released my biotic aura and sighed, frustrated that my attempt to intimidate him had failed, "What the fuck did I tell you about that?"

Recognizing his victory for this round, he calmly strutted back, "Still, your sister is hot. I wouldn't turn down a chance to meet her. Just saying."

I picked up my boots and the drone case in preparation to enter the barracks, having enough of the cold and Galen's taunts about my sister, "My offer to rip you apart with biotics still stands. Just saying."

Following my lead, he grabbed his own boots and pointed out the obvious. "It's not like my reaction was as bad as Finch's."

He had a point there. This entire joke was centered around that asshole's reaction to seeing my personal holo display on the inside of my wall locker. Once Abuela had learned of the address for my training here on Earth she ordered a holo display over the extranet and had it loaded with holos of the family, including some of my parents from before they were ever married. It was a touching and

greatly appreciated gift.

Unfortunately, one of the hundreds of holos it cycled through was of Lizzy when she had gone a short vacation following the end of her internship this summer with MI Squared. She and some of her girlfriends had gone to Eden Prime to enjoy the beaches there and consequently took plenty of holos in bikinis.

I hadn't really thought anything about it. They were holos of my family and I rarely had time to stand there and appreciate them since I was usually in a rush. But Finch did. He noticed the holo of Lizzy, standing on a pristine beach in a dark blue bikini with a purple flower tucked behind her ear, and pounced. Before I even knew what was happening he had rushed over to tap the holo display in order to freeze the cycling and enlarge the holo of Lizzy. His subsequent crude exclamations about her looks drew the attention of the platoon, who quickly noticed the attractive half dressed girl in the holo on my locker and joined in on proclaiming their appreciation.

It had taken every ounce of self restraint I had not to beat the shit out of Finch right then and there. Not just because of his blatant disregard for boundaries and privacy. Not even for his general status as an asshole and irritant. But because in the face of my obvious annoyance at his actions, he grew smug and satisfied at having pushed my haptics nearly to the point of losing my temper.

The motherfucker knew what he was doing and wanted to get a reaction from me. It was at that point, after I had calmed down a bit, that I recognized most of his tough guy act and bravado was his way of trying to intimidate people. He thrived on making others fear him or establishing dominance. From that point on I swore to myself that I wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

At least not yet. I may or may not beat him unconscious once we graduate.

Having to breathe deeply to reign in my temper just at the thought of him, I trudged alongside Galen towards the barracks and shook my head in frustration, "Don't remind me."

He sighed, his own face in a scowl, "I still say you should have kicked his ass. You had a perfect excuse and you blew it."

If I had issues with Finch, then Galen was almost murderous. Their personalities couldn't be more different despite them both having similar backgrounds. Both kids who grew up in the forgotten shadows of metropolises. But whereas Galen was more upbeat and carried no airs about his streetwise ways, Damian Finch was wrapped up in his persona as a gang member from Earth. Covered in tattoos and always scowling, he tried to come across as someone to be feared, but always ended up being someone to hate.

The two of them would clash frequently, with Galen voicing his opinion about Finch's antics and Finch trying to prove he was tougher than Galen. It was tiresome and as their squad leader I was getting annoyed with always having to stop them before it went too far. It had already happened once with a few blows traded before we could break them up. Luckily DI Ellsion never found out so I was able to keep them from killing each other and avoid having our squad punished for it.

Glancing at Galen, I warned him "He's a punk but he's not worth it. Don't fall for his shit."

"Maybe. Still would have been awesome to see someone shut him the fuck up. I'm getting sick and tired of hearing him run his mouth." Galen remarked darkly before snidely mocking Finch's claims, "Like anyone gives a fuck about the gang he ran with here on Earth."

Breathing deeply and looking to the stars for guidance I reminded Galen, again. "Relax, Galen. He's just doing it to get a reaction."

Galen grunted and we continued in near silence, the crunching of gravel and snow beneath our shoes the only sound. As we reached the door to our barracks he engaged the haptic locking mechanism and looked over his shoulder, grumbling a warning, "He's going to get one if he keeps it up."

* * *

><p>Codex Entry: Earth

Earth is the third planet in the Sol star system of the Orior star cluster and the home world of the human species. Sometimes also referred to as Gaia or Terra, it is home to roughly [14,000,000,000], making it the third most populated known planet in the galaxy behind Palaven and Irune. As the birthplace and largest population center of humanity, it bears the weight of the cultural heritage and future for humans.

Conforming to the expected norm of garden worlds, Earth is tectonically active with a mean average temperature of [Terran Translation: 23 degrees Celsius], surface gravity of [Terran Translation: 1 g], and circumference of [Terran Translation: 40,075 km]. The human Terran Standards of time measurements are derived from the planet's day length of [Terran Translation: 24 Terran hours] and an orbital period of [Terran Translation: 365 Terran days; 1 Terran year]. Topography is dominated by expansive and deep oceans that cover roughly seventy percent of the surface. The remaining surface area consists of seven continental land masses and several large islands. Temperate, tropical, and arid climates are represented across the planet. A permanent ice sheet covers the southern pole and a seasonal ice sheet appears in the winter for the northern pole. An above average magnetic field protects the planet from the majority of Sol's radiation. A single natural satellite, Luna, provides strong tidal influence over Earth's seas. Luna has been colonized for several [Terran] centuries and is governed separately from Earth.

Classified by the Citadel Council Ministry of Galactic Surveying [CCMGS] as a tier one garden world, Earth boasts a robust and nurturing biosphere in it's prime. The planet is home to a large biodiversity encompassing millions of native species creating a wide range of unique and specialized ecosystems. Unfortunately, as is common on worlds where a sapient species arises, the biodiversity have been threatened by sapient expansion and the impact upon habitats. Over the course of the last [Terran Translation: 400 Terran years] environmentally conscious policies by humanity as well as

reintroduction of extinct flora and fauna has done much to negate the consequences of earlier human progress. This is seen as a tremendous step forward to undo what is referred to by human scientists and historians as the Holocene Extinction, which roughly coincides with human domination of Earth.

Modern humans would arise roughly [Terran Translation: 200,000 Terran years] ago following the last period of extreme glaciation and began expanding across the planet. They displaced antecedent species and began creating the foundation for their civilization by [Terran Translation: 10,500 Terran years] ago. Xenology experts point to these relatively recent dates and a troubling affinity for aggressive tribalism and expansion in humans as an explanation for the diversity in human genetics and immaturity in human civilization.

The [Terran Translation: 2,000 Terran years] of human history on Earth prior to the Interplanetary War have been marked by increasingly larger nation-states in conflict or struggle with their neighbors. These conflicts escalated in scope and consequence leading to eras of imperial conquest and colonization with the direct consequences of genocide, slavery, totalitarian puppet states, resource wars, economic subjugation, and power vacuums upon the collapse of the empire. All the while human industrial progress and population growth were placing mounting pressure upon the planet. Decimation of environments, pollution, overpopulation, rapacious use of technology, and political graft would exacerbate if not accelerate the cycle of nation-states engaging in conflict. This reckless behavior was not limited to Earth's surface and atmosphere as the incipient age of space exploration left behind a staggering amount of debris in orbit which presented a danger to satellite infrastructure. The Interplanetary War would be the consummation of this cycle and it's aftermath would present a sobering vision of the future of humanity to the survivors.

This reality has lead to the modern state of Earth. In the [Terran] centuries since the end of the war and the creation of the Systems Alliance precursor United Earth Government, various nation-states have merged into conglomerate unions representing mutual economic and political interests. Infrastructure projects repairing destruction from the Interplanetary War or replacing technology rendered obsolete have helped to raise the quality of life across the planet, minimize human impact on the environment, and repair the damage already done. A large percentage of the Earth's population resides in megacities centered around nearly self sustaining arcologies. However, in spite of these changes the majority of humans live in lower tech urban sprawl surrounding these city centers.

Orbital infrastructure has been streamlined, creating [12] orbital tether elevators and their accompanied orbital docking stations. The UNSC Air Force maintains [24] orbital defense platforms as part of their orbital defense grid which also includes approximately [200] terrestrial planetary defense cannons spread out across the surface of Earth and Luna. Additionally, the Earth-Luna L4 and L5 points are inhabited by UNSC Air Force Stations Vostok and Freedom, respectively.

The UNSC Army supports several bases across the planet where they help perform peacekeeping and disaster relief missions in addition to counter insurgency operations on Earth and across the Sol System. UNSC presence extends to several major facilities and training

centers, including: The UNSC HQ in Sydney Metro, New South Wales, PC; UNSC High Military Court in Vancouver Metro, British Columbia, UNAS; and SpecWar HQ, otherwise known as Vila Militar, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, FS.

With humanity gaining access to the technologies, markets, and resources of the galaxy following the [Terran Translation: First Contact War] in [Terran Translation: 2485 CE, Terran Calendar], Earth has become the focal point of a renaissance for human culture and commerce. As a highly developed and mature planet, the greatest sources of economic vitality for Earth are industrial fabrication, service industries, telecommunications, medical R&D, financial services, private security, tourism, and entertainment media. In fact, Earth has seen a tremendous upswing in tourism in the relative stability of Systems Alliance Space following the Second Insurrection War, receiving curious xenos eager to experience human culture and history in person, or nostalgic humans wishing to visit their homeworld for the first time. Popular destinations include many historical landmarks, vacation resorts, museums and universities, amusement parks, and more exotic attractions like Masrani Global's galaxy famous 'Prehistoric Park' simulstim entertainment facility on Isla Nublar.

* * *

><p>Codex Entry: M6 Phalanx Series Pistol

The M6 series pistol is the principal personal defense weapon system used by the human UNSC military forces. Originally created as an entry for the UNSC Offensive Handgun Project in [Terran Translation: 2425 CE, Terran Calendar] by the small upstart weapons manufacturer Misriah Armory based out of Mars, it beat out all other competitors and was awarded the contract. It earned the nickname the Phalanx by UNSC Army troops and law enforcement agencies who used the early models in conjunction with riot shields in tight formations during the riots of the First Insurrection War. Other nicknames include the Magnum, Attitude Adjuster, Power Drill, and more controversially, the Xeno Stopper.

Replacing the M4 series, the M6 has seen incredible longevity via excellent design and multiple variants. The primary design was structured around requests by the UNSC to produce a compact micro scale mass accelerator firearm capable of producing enough stopping power to see no reduction in comparison to standard issue assault rifles. This was achieved by focusing on semiautomatic fire of larger than average shavings with high accuracy. A drawback comes with the limited size of a pistol design that gives little room for sufficient management of the recoil and heat generated. The end result is a slow firing semiautomatic pistol with low capacity before overheat that performs exceedingly well against kinetic barriers and armor plating.

The series is divided into models grouped in pairs that represent an inexpensive general use model with limited modular upgrade capability and a higher quality 'officer's' model with additional systems and increased modular upgrade capability. All models feature a black polymer finish with ceramic accents for ruggedness, insulation, and grip, and comes with a short ventral rail for modular attachments including the M260 Melee Electric Stun Device. A standard smart link VI electronics suite housed on the dorsal surface near the tip of the

barrel that syncs with a HUD in armor and headgear suites. Additionally the weapon can produce an unobtrusive tactical holographic display just above the electronics suite showing simple readouts as well as pop up sights for manual aiming.

The original M6A and M6B models are no longer used by the military but are still in service with law enforcement and private security forces. The models have also been authorized for civilian use and enjoy a bit of a romantic cultural popularity in Systems Alliance space for their portrayal in human entertainment. Colonists on garden worlds in particular prefer the M6A as a rugged and cheap sidearm that can stop large game animals with one or two well placed shots.

The steadfast M6C and M6D variants, first introduced in [Terran Translation: 2518 CE, Terran Calendar], are the UNSC standard issue sidearm and feature white ceramic accents. The M6D officer's model has an additional integral targeting module housed within the dorsal electronics suite that produces a sighting laser that can be linked to networked weapon systems for laser designator guidance. Rumors and vid evidence abound of a classified variant of these models in use by the UNSC's Office of Naval Intelligence [ONI] and Special Warfare Command [SpecWar] during the Second Insurrection War that appears to use an extended barrel mod that reduces recoil and drastically suppresses the sound of firing the pistol.

A departure from the semiautomatic stopping power of the M6 series are the fully automatic M6E and M6F models, named the Eagle, created in the aftermath of the Harvest Campaign. Introduced in [Terran Translation: 2563 CE, Terran Calendar], the weapons function as machine pistols in order to fire a reduced slug size at higher velocities. Engineers at Misriah Armory working in conjunction with ONI produced this weapon upon the request of SpecWar for a compact automatic sidearm for dealing with the common Covenant tactic of using swarms of unggoy employed in suicide charges to overwhelm defenders prior to formal assault by Covenant lances. As a result the weapon has grown to see usage as the preferred sidearm over the M7 Hurricane submachine gun in SpecWar, ONI, and Marine troops. Eagle variants are differentiated from the standard semiautomatic models with gray ceramic accents. The M6F officer's model features the same integral targeting module of the M6D which produces a sighting and designator laser.

The M6 Phalanx is very similar to the H6 Carnifex series of pistols produced by Armax Arsenal for the Turian Hierarchy military forces. So much so that troops for both military forces have little difficulty quickly adapting to firing either system. Only the Batarian Hegemony's military forces produce a similar 'hand cannon' style semiautomatic pistol, although there are multiple variants and knockoffs of all three series produced in the Terminus by Sidimmah Gro'Bash and Elkoss Combine. A great deal of the weapons, specifically the M6A and M6B models, are illegally modified and used by human insurrectionist forces. And as with the majority of Misriah Armory weapons, concerns are voiced in the Systems Alliance Parliament and media as to the reliance upon dated weapon systems made by defense contractors with heavy ties to the UNSC.

* * *

><p>Codex Entry: M739 Typhoon Light Machine Gun

The Misriah Armory M739 Light Machine Gun [LMG], referred to by human troops as the Typhoon for the withering and punishing storm of shavings it spews, is the UNSC's standard issue squad automatic weapon. It serves as a man portable offensive and defensive weapon capable of longer periods of sustained fire than most other micro scale mass accelerator infantry weapons in the UNSC arsenal.

The introduction of micro scale mass accelerators in [Terran Translation: 2304 CE, Terran Calendar] changed the landscape of human warfare, but it would be nearly half a century before reliable automatic models were available to the UNSC. Weapons manufacturers were quick to advance the technology in hopes of procuring a Systems Alliance approved contract. Okonjo Ballistics Research [OBR] of Earth would nab the lucrative contract in [Terran Translation: 2368 CE, Terran Calendar] and go on to specialize in providing the UNSC arsenal of machine guns and autocannons. Misriah Armory would purchase OBR in [Terran Translation: 2463 CE, Terran Calendar] for the research teams, production assets, and existing contracts.

The M739 is a legacy of this acquisition, produced by members of the OBR research teams who immediately began examining and reverse engineering xeno heavy automatic weapons used by turian military forces during the [Terran Translation: First Contact War]. Later avenues of research and inspiration would be tapped upon galactic markets and technology being made available with the ceasefire and subsequent Citadel Charter negotiations. Misriah began field test trials for the M739 in [Terran Translation: 2524 CE, Terran Calendar] with UNSC Special Warfare [SpecWar] units during training operations on Reach. The UNSC officially contracted with Misriah for the M739 in [Terran Translation: 2527 CE, Terran Calendar], obsoleting the originally OBR produced M38 Heavy Machine Gun.

Large and heavy, the Typhoon is built to be carried and wielded by a single soldier in a suppressive fire infantry role. The weapon is capable of sustained saturation fire by launching average sized shavings at incredible velocities and a very high rate of fire. This produces significant heat and recoil which are regulated by two unique management systems that account for nearly half of the weapon's weight. The light machine gun features an extended and thick barrel that houses the reinforced rails and unique heat management system. Seated on the ventral surface in front of the trigger guard is a rotating drum assembly with slots for up to eight small ammo blocks. A lack of modular railing prevents external attachments, but a VI electronics housing suite on the dorsal surface near the muzzle provides one of the more robust advanced sensory and target acquisition services in any UNSC standard weapon. As standard with all UNSC weapons, the electronics suite syncs with armor or headgear suites, and can create an unobtrusive tactical holographic display just above the electronics suite showing simple readouts as well as pop up sights for manual aiming.

The weapon has undergone two major revisions. The first was to address the issue with the formidable recoil produced was the kinetic recoil reduction upgrade. Along the dorsal surface are a series of magnetic and element zero modules linked to the weapon's firing mechanism. Active only during firing they serve as a kinetic reducer and aiming stabilizer, but the fields produced also prohibit movement of the weapon making it difficult to advance while firing or switch targets effectively. The second was to add greater protection for the

user with a gun shield in response a problem created with the introduction of the kinetic recoil reduction system. The force of the kinetic recoil reduction system served to make the user a slow and easily exposed target when firing, necessitating additional cover. Made of a two retractable ceramic plates attached to either side of the barrel, the shield deploys when the weapon is fired and folds back against the weapon when not in use for storage and ease of movement. Either system can be disabled through options within the weapons internal computer but is not suggested.

The M739 shares a similar role and function as the Asari Republics 5004 Oxybeles LMG produced by Serrice Armaments, the M79 Revenant LMG produced by Sidimmah Gro'Bash [SGB], and the Batarian Hegemony 414 Mushus LMG produced by Ankar'Tail State Arms [ATSA]. The Systems Alliance has recently approved Misriah Armory licensing the kinetic recoil reduction system to Serrice Armaments for use in the 5004 Oxybeles. Used extensively by UNSC Infantry, Security Details, SpecWar Units, and ONI operations, the Typhoon is most famously known for being the weapon used by Star of Terra recipient UNSC Army Corporal Tania Cardoso.

The weapon does possess significant drawbacks, most notoriously it's weight and recoil. UNSC soldiers often complain the kinetic recoil reduction system only serves to exacerbate the already heavy weapon, but without the system activated the recoil can quickly overwhelm even the strongest of users. The gun shield is another source of concern as it reduces the field of vision and forces reliance upon sensors. Under attack from electronic countermeasures or in environments where sensors are of poor assistance, this can make the lack of vision deadly. A final criticism is the rate at which the weapon malfunctions due to the stress of recoil and heat. The M739 must be meticulously serviced and maintained, often requiring replacement parts installed to prevent failure during combat.

* * *

><p>Codex Entry: Neural Interface

The seamless interface between sapients and technology has long been considered one of the great ambitions of civilization. Proponents argue that the majority of automation and intelligence programming is rendered obsolete by giving the sapient mind direct access and full control of the environment around them. This level of cybernetic augmentation, while risky, introduces expanded frontiers for telepresence applications, assisted learning, memory and personality mapping, and entertainment possibilities.

Neural interfacing technology was independently researched and tested by all Tier One races prior to their interstellar phase of development. Early research was invariably geared towards aiding those with physical or mental handicaps which lacked the possibility of full recovery or reintegration into society. As advancements in other augmentation disciplines such as genetics and cybernetics increased the ability to prevent or repair any damage done the need for such neural interfacing decreased. As a consequence, the focus of neural interfacing research shifted from aiding the disabled towards enhancing the healthy and whole.

Modern practice and implementation of the technology has seen a small but growing acceptance in the galactic community in the past [Terran

Translation: 400 Terran years]. Breakthroughs in research and market forces have created a package of implants and extension technologies that make neural implantation more safe and practical than ever. A prime example being the entertainment and training technology known as simulstim. More functional uses include teleoperation of robotic platforms, enhanced control when piloting vehicles, improved function when performing technical work, and increased identity security options.

The technology is not without its detractors or disadvantages. While the implantation and interfacing technology is proven in nearly all races, it does require extensive maintenance to prevent problems from arising due to malfunctioning implants. The cost of implantation and maintenance is not trivial and presents a significant hurdle to wider acceptance of neural implant products. The cost also creates a public health risk as an implanted individual that fails to professionally maintain their device runs the guaranteed risk of neurological trauma and erratic device performance. More concerning is that once implanted the device is incredibly difficult to remove and only very specialized clinics offer the service.

The devices also present an unfortunate weakness that has yet to be completely addressed. Because the neural implants allow for full function signal processing between devices and users, they are susceptible to hacking, spying, and faulty programming. Highly publicized incidents of neural interfaces being hacked to facilitate assassinations, government agencies illegally using the technology to observe political dissidents, or a mass of epileptic seizures caused by malicious or faulty programming have greatly increased fears.

More controversial are neural implants which use highly unstable or unethical technologies. One such implant, the graybox, is an illegal implant based upon an old and unproven experimental technology. Originally researched by humans to treat a degenerative neural condition called Alzheimer's Disease it was abandoned as human medical advances made the condition preventable and curable. The disease would negatively impact intellectual faculties resulting in memory loss and erratic social behavior. A graybox was theorized as a neural implant that would store a whole mind emulation of the individual to supplement the failing organic brain. The technology has since seen reemergence in the galactic black market as an illicit supplementary and heavily encrypted neural data storage device with possibilities for increased multitasking. Unfortunately, the illegal and experimental nature of such black market implants has resulted in increased risk of neural degeneration in all known recipients.

Even more troubling are a series of marginally legal neural implants that utilize the heavily criticized technology of behavior modification. Having its roots in an archaic and discontinued asari technology for correcting criminal behavior, the implants have long been a hot haptic issue in academic and public discussions on neural augmentation. The common complaints are variations of the theme that all neural implants are by design capable of behavior modification or worse. While it is true that such technology exists and sees rampant use in the Terminus for slavery, it is rarely used in Citadel Space and only under extreme circumstances of violent criminals. The likelihood of an individual with standard neural implantation to lose agency to their bodily and mental faculties under focused hacking is for all intents and purposes nil. Experts in information security,

neural technology, and law enforcement assure the public that while feasible, the process would be so complicated for short term gain as to be pointless to undertake.

The future of neural applications is geared towards the industries gaining public trust in their products. Most government agencies and large corporations offer the implantation and maintenance for free as an advantage of employment. The neural technology industry is currently focusing on forming a lobbying group built upon encouraging the Citadel Council and Citadel Charter governments to offer tax credits and public health policies that promote neural implantation. To this end they have gained a great deal of support from associated industries that rely heavily on neural interfacing for production or sales as well as worker's unions and civil rights groups representing large populations of individuals with neural implants.

* * *

><p>Codex Entry: Omni Fabrication SuiteOmniigel**

The combination of fabrication technology and mobile computing have made a tremendous impact upon the galaxy. The capability to use an omnitool or other device to control a micro fabrication suite module opens the airlock to incredible possibilities in sales, maintenance, technical operations, and warfare.

A micro fabrication suite module is a small device that can be added to any omnitool and often comes standard with deluxe or custom models. Prices for the module can be steep, as entry level device costs are comparable to top tier omnitools and top of the line micro fabrication suites can run in the range of tens of thousands of credits. For professionals in various occupational fields, or just your average professional extranet shopper, the advantage of having a micro fabrication suite mounted on your wrist is invaluable.

The device works by using mass effect and magnetic fields to suspend and shape omniigel per the schematic designs supplied. Lower end fabrication suites are capable of only small fields and crude adjustments, leaving them best used for simple items. Top tier suites have more precise and powerful fields to create a wider range of products and tools.

Omniigel is the real focal point of the this technology with quirks that greatly effect the economy. The substance consists of common compounds used to make reusable industrial plastics, ceramics, and alloys held in a semi molten state. Usually sold and used in small vials, the average 'dose' of omniigel is good for a handful of fabrications making a steady supply a necessity for the galactic micro fabrication market. Luckily the substance can be obtained from everyday materials and objects that are broken down to their base compounds. Less fortunate is this can only be achieved by heavily regulated commercial dissociaters or even more tightly controlled industrial nanites. Both are only licensed to reputable dealers, scientific research groups, accredited starship vessels, corporate facilities, government agencies, and military forces.

As none of these parties but the licensed dealers are authorized for resale to the public this places the majority of the galaxy at a disadvantage as they must purchase omniigel from businesses who are notorious for changing prices to reflect market demand. The Citadel

Council and Charter Governments do their best to enforce laws on omnigel at the behest of interested parties who rely upon extranet fabrication sales. One innovative policy has been to encourage licensed dealers to engage in recycling programs where the public may pay a reduced service fee to have items they no longer need or want converted down into omnigel.

More specialized and sophisticated micro fabrication suites are used by carefully licensed professions. Most military, law enforcement, and licensed private security forces use a weaponized omni fabrication suite designed to create a temporary bladed or blunt melee weapon suspended above the device. These Omniweapons are meant to be close quarters combat tools mounted into the vambraces or gauntlets of personal armor defense systems or as melee attachments to weapons. Exotic variants allow for razor 'gauntlets', batons that can conduct an electrical current, and even ballistic defense shields. Law enforcement and customs agencies typically scan an omnitool as individuals pass through checkpoints or are stopped for violations to look for illegal omni technology such as an unlicensed micro fabrication suite.

Even with such precautions, criminal elements are still capable of using the technology to their advantage. In addition to the weaponized omni fabrication systems, some criminals have learned to use omnigel and a micro fabrication suite creatively to bypass locking mechanisms. This brute force method disables the lock by manipulating a previously unknown weakness in the haptic display emitters and sensors. As this is a haptic technology issue, all haptic systems are vulnerable to this manner of attack. Tech and security experts are puzzled on how to best combat this problem as it would involve an expensive complete overhaul of haptic holographic systems across the galaxy. With trillions of systems in place and billions of sapients with haptic implants, the focus of this issue appears to be more and more headed towards a software solution.

* * *

><p>Codex Entry: Simulstim

Simulstim is the premiere simulation technology of the galaxy. Users are immersed in a fully interactive virtual environment through neural interfacing, haptic holographics, advanced VI programming, adjustable environments, and sensory augmentation devices. It is a driving force in normalizing neural and cybernetic implantation, and sees widespread usage in various settings.

The current incarnation of the technology has it's roots in the end of the [Terran Translation: First Contact War] and ensuing negotiations involving the Systems Alliance signing of the Citadel Charter. The human entertainment industry was poised to exploit interest in human culture with introduced new galactic technologies. One such technology was a [Galactic] centuries old method of sensory immersive training used by turian military forces. For all intents and purposes identical to technology in use by human military forces and educational institutions of the time, the turian method had one significant difference in an underutilized function of handling a high number of simultaneous neural interfaces. Human entertainment industries immediately purchased the technology and began research to develop it into an entertainment platform.

Light & Shadow Pictures [LSP] would be the first to introduce the modern simulation technology for the masses. In [Terran Translation: 2499 CE, Terran Calendar] people across the galaxy spent trillions of credits to experience the proprietary RealityPlus technology when LSP released the self produced asarisplotation buddy SPECTRE vid Serrice Vice, making it the highest grossing vid ever. The breakout star was the RealityPlus technology experience which was showcased in full to rave reviews from critics and the public alike. Audiences and download viewers everywhere were in awe of the full sensory effect of action sequences, sexually charged intimate encounters, breathtaking simulated environments, and edge of your seat perspectives during stunts. Overnight, corporations and government agencies around the galaxy were clamoring for LSP's favor in licensing the technology. While the technology has since been reverse engineered and replicated by various entities, LSP's RealityPlus technology continues to be on the cutting edge and remains the industry eezo standard with brand recognition the public trusts.

Simulstim technology has revolutionized all facets of galactic society by expanding the horizons. Vessels and vehicles become literal extensions of their pilots as they respond to sensory input as if they were their own. Researchers and investigators obtain greater understanding of events through immersed assessment based upon recorded data and theoretical simulations. Telepresence is improved by giving users increased awareness and sensory input to better interact with their remote surroundings. Instructors are capable of using the technology to create virtual classrooms and 'real world' scenarios to safely test student skill and gauge improvement. Entertainment and news providers create a full spectrum of media packages for all audiences with an emphasis on realistic individual experiences. A big winner in the simulstim innovation has been the secondary market of accessory devices and implants required in order to fully experience. Omnitool manufacturers have made Simulstim support a standard feature in all operating systems. Sensory headgear, tactile suits, and hapticware are staples of Simulstim accessory purchases for those unwilling or unable to undergo neural implantation.

The technology has since been adapted to a number of formats and improved upon in many ways. Foremost in this wave of improvements has been the salarian introduction of live interactive environments with Simulstim. Used as an instruction tool at the elite Katak Gila military training center, it combined Simulstim with the existing technologies of VI controlled robotic platforms, adaptive and automated obstacle courses, environmental testing chambers, and reconfigurable kill house settings. The end result was the creation of Full Immersion Interactive Live Training [FIILTr], an enclosed training facility which could simulate any scenario with live action props augmented with sensory input to fully immerse trainees. Military, law enforcement, and private security forces across the galaxy soon created their own versions and would adapt the technology to seamlessly fit into standard operations.

While there were several successful attempts to use FIILTr technology for purposes outside of combat and combat training, the Simulstim industry was revolutionized yet again in [Terran Translation: 2538 CE, Terran Calendar] by the turian arms manufacturer Armax Arsenal with the introduction of Armax Arena. The first ever FIILTr center open to the public, Armax Arena emphasized holographic visuals and third party client immersion to create a crowd and audience friendly

viewing experience. The first season of the Armax Arsenal Arena championship was an astounding success, spawning several imitations across the galaxy which were eventually merged into the Galactic Urban Combat Championship League. FIILTr technology has become a hot property, not the least of which has been to further enhance training simulations of all kinds. Other examples are the multitudes of interactive 'edutainment' and personal indulgence amusement parks across the galaxy where historical events, scientific wonders, fantastical fictional settings, exotic vacation locales, and customized hedonistic experiences are brought to life for paying audiences.

As with all technological advances, there are shortcomings, flaws, and problems that arise from unexpected social impacts. Most concerns lie in similar fears regarding neural implantation. Chiefly that faulty or malicious programming could lead to disastrous outcomes. Other concerns are the decades of research on negative impact in individuals able to withdraw into Simulstims and simulations that cater to all personal whims. Experts in behavioral and social sciences warn of the ease for individuals in particular and society in general to seek stimulation and interaction through media that replaces genuine social contact. Another concern is over stimulation leading to desensitized reactions to reality. With Simulstim relying heavily upon sensory input that often exceeds expectations in the material world to immerse the user, it becomes difficult to attain the same reactions to imperfect authentic stimuli as opposed to the enhanced and perfect virtual stimuli. A final concern is the limitations of virtual intelligence programming to effectively mimic sapient behavior in training environments. Stimulsim communities have long felt that despite personality imprinting and advanced behavioral programming the limited capability for self awareness in VI makes for predictable interactions with virtual entities that lack spontaneity and depth.

Experts and critics believe that after decades of advances Simulstim innovation has largely plateaued. Central in this belief is the prohibition on true artificial intelligence programming, which limits the potential of interaction in virtual settings. Additionally, immersive environments are only as innovative and original as the imaginations of the creative teams that design and program them. Finally, the cultural resistance towards neural implantation is an impediment to unleashing the full potential of Simulstim technology. These limitations have formed a boundary that is referred to as the 'Sapient Ceiling' in the Simulstim industry. While the technology is expected to continue it's dominance in various fields, the future of Simulstim is reliant upon a technological or cultural breakthrough to shatter this boundary.

13. Maturity Is A Process Of Mistakes

AN: More continuation of Shep's time in MVC. Bit more of a focus on the traits he'll cultivate later on in his career. Also highlights some of the people who will be important in his life and the foundation of their relationships.

* * *

><p>Ural Mountains, Yugra, Russian Federal Republic, Earth, Sol System, Orior Cluster; November 16th, 2572 [Standardized Terran

Calendar], 1125 [Local Time, Terran Standard]

Looking out across the snow and ice covered mountains and the thought that my first ever time on Earth had been a letdown resurfaced. Just really anticlimactic. I'd been so focused on proving myself that the novelty of the experience had been overshadowed.

Sweeping my gaze over the winter landscape I was left with the impression that if this was the place where it all began then it's no wonder so many of our species left in a hurry. This place was miserable. And cold.

My family had a history of flocking to warm places. I'm from Mindoir. My mother was from Bekenstein. Dad was...

I frowned and corrected myself. Actually, we didn't know much about Dad's history. He hadn't been interested in looking back through genetic and identitag records to learn about the people who given him up. Mom had made all of us understand from an early age that it wasn't a subject worth bringing up. All we knew is that he had been raised in an orphanage in one of the northern UNAS states and had fled the moment he turned eighteen. For all I knew I could be a long lost member of the Ashlands.

My imagination conjured up images of Lizzy, Ari and myself being part of the media spectacle that was humanity's most prominent and infamous family. I could definitely see Lizzy playing the role of a spoiled and arrogant socialite heiress. Chuckling to myself, I could also envision Ari as the rebel wild child that was the black sheep of the family.

Off to the side Finch, who had his helmet off, looked at me sharply with a seething glare. I realized that my woolgathering had left me looking like I found our current situation something to laugh about. I hardened my expression and glared back but Finch held my gaze with a dead stare before dismissing me with a snort and a shake of his head.

I glanced back towards the middle of our squad grouping and saw Barrera was still trying to figure out the best course for us to take. This was a land navigation trial. We typically did two per week without the aid of telemetry to prepare us for conditions on a battlefield or uninhabited planet.

This week it was her turn to handle land navigation for the squad and she was struggling. Problem was that I knew she could do this. She passed the sims with the highest scores in the squad and was always able to provide help to those who needed it when it was their turn. The only thing I could guess as to why she was screwing up now was stress and pressure. Being made squad leader opened my eyes on how it's not so easy to do the same tasks when you have an audience and those looking to you for instructions.

Activating the voice module in my helmet I cleared my throat to get attention. When she looked up from her omnitool I addressed her "So what have we got, Griz?"

She seemed hesitant and unlike herself, glancing back down at her omnitool before looking back at me. A pitiful grin and shoulder shrug accompanied her reply "The bad news is we're definitely off

course."

I growled softly at her announcement. We'd been out here in these damn snowy mountains for hours now. We had to be behind schedule to reach our destination on time. Closing my eyes and breathing deeply I reminded myself that a major part of this exercise wasn't just doing something quickly. It was learning to do it right. To trust your skill and instincts. Barrera needed to learn to trust in her ability to navigate. If we were late but she learned then it was worth it.

"So what's the good news?" Galen sounded like he was just as miserable as I was being out here in the cold but at least his tone wasn't overtly hostile.

Barrera chuckled mirthlessly, shut off her omnitool and stood, hefting her assault rifle "We know where we are now?"

"You're fucking hilarious, Grizzy." Even if her humor was a bit inappropriate at the moment everyone turned to glare at Finch for his remark.

Galen looked especially perturbed. Shocking. "Why don't you just shut the fuck up, Damian?"

Finch grinned at getting a reaction out of Galen and feigned ignorance "What? I'm just saying. She may not know how to navigate for shit, but at least she can laugh at herself."

Knowing how Finch loved to mock failures and push people's haptics I figured it was my job to cut him off and focus on the task at hand. "Knock it off. Both of you."

Galen glared at me but nodded. Finch glanced in my direction and muttered something under his breath. Since he didn't have his helmet on and the wind going through the mountains was strong enough to distort any amplification software in my helmet I had no clue what he said. Figuring it was something smart assed and insubordinate I decided to assert myself "What was that, Finch? I didn't quite hear that. Speak up."

He narrowed his eyes at being put on the spot and snarled back in a mocking military manner. "Whatever you say, Elvis."

The ensuing silence from the rest of the squad after our little exchange made me feel awkward and more than a little guilty for using my authority. Knowing Finch would blow off any attempt to apologize I focused my efforts on seeing if Barrera had worked out her issues. "Griz you got an idea on what we need to do?"

"Yeah, Shepard." Barrera seemed to wilt under the focus of the rest of the squad and began second guessing herself again. "I mean... I think I'm sure."

"You know what you're doing, Griz. Trust in your skills." I could definitely relate to her anxiety but I almost cringed as the words left my mouth. They sounded horribly trite and hollow. If someone had said those words to me I would be rolling my eyes.

She seemed to have more tact than me, or maybe she was more nervous

than I had thought, because she just nodded curtly and consulted her omnitool again. A few seconds later and my HUD activated to show a new marker. I checked over her work and agreed.

Giving everyone else the signal to gear up and prepare to move out I busied myself by performing a systems check on my weapon. The M392 Saber DMR cycled through it's diagnostics and verified it's functionality. I aimed my weapon at a peak in the distance and my HUD relayed estimated distance and environmental conditions.

Satisfied with the results I lowered my rifle and looked the squad over. Everyone was finishing their own equipment checks and seemed to be ready to move out. I initiated a ready check and the status lights on my HUD for each squad member came back green. Nodding to Barrera I got us moving "Alright Griz. You're up."

She breathed deeply and nodded back, bracing herself before heading out as the lead for the first team. I would be leading the second team a few meters behind but while we waited for them to get some distance I checked the team over. The first thing I noticed was that Galen was still glaring at Finch from behind his depolarized faceplate. I nudged him with the butt of my rifle to get his attention. When he looked at me I made a point of using my eyes to shift between the two of them before staring Galen down and shaking my head slowly.

Galen understood my nonverbal instructions and rolled his eyes. He sighed and rolled his shoulders before hefting his battle rifle skyward and speaking through his voice module "Man, I can not wait to get back and take a warm shower."

The rest of the squad chuckled and grumbled their approval. Shih mocked Galen for his renown enthusiasm of taking lengthy showers despite all attempts to get him to do otherwise. "You act like you've never taken a bath before, Kemp."

"C-Sec and the Council control everything on the Citadel. Unless you're on the grid and paying taxes, you're not getting regular access to basic utilities like water." Galen shrugged at her remark before grinning and bantering back. "You know you like the show, Lifan."

She gave him an unimpressed once over before deadpanning "If it's a show I'd call it a tragic comedy."

The team broke into a chorus of laughter and catcalls at Galen's expense. Galen looked flummoxed behind his faceplate before calming down and joining in on the laughter. I slapped him on the back and checked my omnitool. Barrera's team was reaching the limits of my suit's sensors which meant it was time for me to get us moving.

Hating to be the one to break up the good mood I called out "Time to move, folks." Glancing at Galen I couldn't help but throw one more cheap shot his way. "You got point, Kemp. Put on a show for us."

He frowned and glared at me before polarizing his faceplate and trudged off with a huff. Shih wolf whistled and cat called at his back causing Galen to pause and shake his head before continuing on.

We followed in his wake and trailed Grizy's squad through the snowy and craggy terrain with minimal fuss and plenty of talking. Nearly two hours later we crested a ridge and in the valley below was a small clearing with a single Pelican dropship coated with a light dusting of snow. Looks like Barrera got her bearings and lead us to the right spot. Checking my omnitool and winced at what I saw. Judging by the time needed to reach the Pelican below we were about a half hour behind on time. We'd made up quite a bit of ground with our quicker pace during this final leg given how far off course we had been but I doubt that would be something in our favor.

Using my HUD's magnification ability I focused in on a solitary figure leaning against the side of the dormant dropship staring back up at us on the ridge crest.

Shit. DI Ellison was going to give us hell over this.

I spent the remaining time during our descent into the valley fretting over possible excuses and explanations. She wasn't going to believe a single one but she responded even worse to a lack of answers. By her estimation if you not only failed to put in the effort to succeed at a task but also failed to understand why you failed then you just didn't care. And she had plenty of ways to help you find the motivation required to care.

As we approached DI Ellison was in a cold rage that could have dropped the low temperatures even lower in her presence. "Twenty six minutes overdue, first squad. An unacceptable failure. Form up."

I ran to take my place as the leader of the squad so the rest could form up off of me. Once in place DI Ellison stared us down and moved to stand in front of me, "Recruit Shepard clarify the importance of punctuality in regards to operation time frames?"

Schooling my features I swallowed back all emotions and reminded myself that although she was asking me this was a squad failure. But as squad leader the responsibility was mine. "Because those are the orders, drill instructor."

She eyed me and didn't seem to appreciate my response "You failed to explain the why, recruit. Perhaps the knowledge or capability to understand eludes you. As your instructor it is imperative that I redress this deficit."

DI Ellison stepped back and paced slowly. The way she walked and the cloud of heated breath coming from her nose and mouth made her look like a dragon come to life stalking her prey. "Your fellow platoon mates have concluded their land navigation trial and are currently proceeding back to Tango Foxtrot Three. You knuckleheads missed a movement. Outside of the comfy and no fault confines of your training that can prove to be fatal. For you and for others." She paused in her pacing, losing her calm veneer and bellowed with rage at us. "Did it ever occur in your primitive reptilian brains that your job as bravos would involve hot LZ, recruits? While you dawdling reprobates were touring the countryside your compatriots would have been forced to leave you behind in hostile territory. And if they had honored the bonds of camaraderie and refused to abandon their fellow warriors? They would be obligated to hold the LZ until you lollygagging jokers arrived. Deaths would be inevitable and on your carefree heads."

She breathed deeply and calmed down, resuming her icy fury. "The UNSC functions as a team and a team is only as strong as it's weakest link. Do not be that weakest link, recruits."

Returning to me she growled her dissatisfaction with my answer, "Has it been impressed upon you sufficiently as to why it is critical that you be where you are expected to be at a time when you are expected to be there, Recruit Shepard?" I nodded and she continued "Then explain to me why your squad missed a movement, squad leader."

Getting a hold of the fear of failure I resisted the the urge to glance to my left and look down the line at Barrera. I could tell the truth but that would be abdicating my responsibility as squad leader and probably crushing Griselda's confidence in her abilities. Or I could shoulder that responsibility and deal with the repercussions. Weighing my options I thought on it twice and there wasn't a doubt in my mind what the right answer could be. "I lost track of time, ma'am."

Standing steadfast DI Ellison made no indication she believed me. A moment of glaring later and she turned to pointedly look further down the line at Barrera. When no one broke under her scrutiny she nodded slowly and raised her hand to gesture to the pilots of the Pelican to start the engines. Hollering over the whoosh of the thrusters firing up, she informed us it was time to leave "We'll be discussing appropriate corrective actions at a later time. Fall out and load up."

My shoulders sagged and I started jogging towards the troop bay but DI Ellison grabbed me by my upper right arm. Eyeing the rest of the squad, she waited until they were out of hearing distance and then leaned in to speak over the roar without yelling. "You are aware that as Drill Instructor I am able to monitor the comms and sensors of my barracks, your omnitools, and your suits? I know everything that happens to my recruits at all times? Like what happened between Recruits Kemp and Finch? Or the real reason why your squad missed their objective?"

I froze and didn't respond. What else could I say? She had caught me in my lies. We both knew I was stuck. Filling in the blanks, DI Ellison gave me a bit of advice "I can greatly appreciate taking responsibility and covering for your squad, but do not make a habit of lying, recruit. Especially to me."

Not knowing how to respond I simply nodded. Was I in trouble or what?

She released my arm and tilted her head to the Pelican. Realizing that I wasn't going to be killed and then dismembered I jogged towards the dropship. All I could think about was that the ride back was going to be very awkward should she decide to revisit this conversation and threaten to toss me out the back of the Pelican.

* * *

><p>UNSC Training Facility Three, Omsk Oblast, Russian Federal Republic, Earth, Sol System, Local Interstellar Cluster; November 21st, 2572 [Standardized Terran Calendar], 1737 [Local Time,

Terran Standard]

"_These allegations are false and I categorically deny them. They are nothing more than another example of Systems Alliance overreach and a distraction from failed policies by the Zupan administration. Terra Firma is yet again the victim of Arcturus politics and being trotted out for persecution. The Zupan administration and their brand of entrenched corrupt politicians do not like it when we point out the truth that the Systems Alliance is a bloated bureaucracy beholden to alien interests. I look forward to my vindication once the truth emerges."_

The woman on the vid screen in the mess hall left left the podium amid reporters and camera drones requesting further statements. I chewed on my energy bar and swallowed it back with a grimace. Carrot cake. Who in the hell thought it was a good idea to try and make something that flavor? Even worse, who thought it would be a good idea to buy them in bulk to feed the UNSC? I swear, there were idiots running things at Arcturus. Either that or sadistic VI's.

Actually thinking about that for a moment, it wasn't that far fetched to think the UNSC would program all their VI's to be assholes. They'd fit right in.

After taking back a swig of water to cleanse my mouth of that horrid taste I glanced back at the vid screen. It had transitioned to a studio shot of an asian man sitting behind a desk. A graphic banner floated at the lower portion of the screen with the tagline 'Terra Fractus?'

"_That was Terra Firma party leader Inez Simmons speaking on the charges brought forward by the Systems Alliance Ministry of Justice that have all of Arcturus buzzing. Allegations of bribery and misuse of political office involving the often outspoken leader of the upstart political movement and the aerospace giant Nashan Stellar Dynamics. This comes on the heels of an investigation into NSD tax records after the Citadel Council found evidence of the corporation's dealings in the Terminus that violate the Citadel Charter and the Treaty of Pax."_

Now that got my attention. I put down my drink in order to activate my omnitool to save the links for later on. This sounded like something serious and if I remember correctly NSD was one of the biggest contractors for the UNSC. If it was made by humans and flew or traveled through vacuum chances are it had parts made by NSD. Plus there was entire involvement of the Citadel Council, which was always something that made major waves. Nearly a century into our membership with the galactic races of the Citadel and there was still tensions whenever the Council interfered with human affairs.

"_Further intrigue continues as Terra Firma is scheduled to continue their annual tradition of holding the party convention on Armistice Day in February as part of their defiance to humanity's treaty with the Council eighty five years ago. Speaker Simmons has been under pressure of late to forward some of her party's more radical stances while she and her most loyal supporters have attempted to temper rhetoric in order to build coalitions on Arcturus. Many expect her to face stiff competition from within her own ranks for leadership of the party as the general consensus amongst Terra Firma voters and party members is that she has not done enough with the power their

surprising wins in 2570 granted them. These charges will certainly make for a more raucous and inflammatory than usual conversation on Shanxi early next year. I'm Kim Jae Hong and this has been the ANN newsbreak."—

I wouldn't be bothering to follow that part of the story too closely. I had made the mistake once of visiting a Terra Firma online forum as part of research for a school report on the Systems Alliance government and their handling of the Insurrection Wars.

Never again.

I also didn't feel one gram of pity for this woman. She had been the one to push the Transhuman Ministry to pursue that study into biotics being inherently violent.

Fuck her.

I hope they find her guilty, lock her up and throw away the keycode. Because of her and her party's games the thousands of human biotics across the Systems Alliance would be under even more scrutiny from their neighbors. Those with L2 implants were becoming frustrated with the political blame game while they were denied compensation for the faulty technology behind so many of their health issues. And now there was even talks about having the biotic registration lists made public because the people deserved to know if they and their families were living near potentially dangerous 'mutants'.

That people thought of biotics like me as mutants brought back memories of Ilyse. I reflexively cast my glance down towards the polished metal surface of the mess hall table and played with the wrapper to my energy bar.

"That's bullshit." Further down the table Vercesi pierced my silent depression as he voiced his opinion on the news. "Terra Firma is always being targeted because they speak the truth."

"Terra Firma is always being targeted because they're a bunch of loudmouths that support Innies." Barrera refuted around a mouthful of nutrient paste. She swallowed and speared Vercesi with a challenging glare, "Support for Terra Firma is as good as support for the murderers in the NCA."

Vercesi glared back and snarled "Support for anyone but Terra Firma is support for the aliens that attacked Shanxi and the aliens that stood by during Harvest."

"The turians who attacked Shanxi were punished for their misconduct." Barrera leaned forward, a mocking grin on her face as she taunted her favorite verbal sparring partner in the squad. "But be sure to tell those turians how you really feel the first time you're deployed on a CDEM mission, you xenophobe."

I sighed knowing it was my responsibility as squad leader to break up this argument before we attracted attention. The last thing we needed was more reasons for DI Ellison to assign our squad extra duties. Like servicing all the weapons in the armory this week hadn't been bad enough. "Knock it off. We serve the UNSC and the UNSC serves the Systems Alliance. We do what we are told."

"And who tells the Systems Alliance what to do? A Council of aliens." Vercesi let that final remark fly before going back to his meal. Barrera stared him heatedly but thought better of it and stayed silent, shaking her head in disgust and annoyance.

The squad continued in silence for a moment, chewing, drinking and watching the ANN program on the latest news from Earth and the major colonies. That is until Finch decided to put me on the spot. "You're an eezo mutant, right? What do you think about Terra Firma?"

The squad went deathly silent at his use of the slur for biotics. All that went through my mind was that Damian Finch could be such an annoying fucking punk. Most of the time it was a struggle not to punch him and tell him to go running back to his gang. The reds or rads or something. I don't remember. I mostly ignored him when he went on one of his bragging rants.

"What about you, dipshit? You think Terra Firma is right?" In the absence of my response Galen stared down Finch and threw the question back in his face.

Damian leaned back and observed Galen coolly, smiling at his nemesis. Eventually he shrugged and glanced my way "I don't really care one way or another. Aliens. Innies. Councils. Parliaments. It's all bullshit. I'm just here to kill shit. Just wondering how Elvis felt about it. Y'know, seeing as how they hate him for being a biotic but would love to send him into war. Maybe get a little payback for all the people he knew that died on Mindoir?"

I tore my eyes away from his and stared at the polished metal finish of the table. Counting to ten and breathing deeply in order to control the rage I was feeling inside. Since joining the UNSC I hadn't told anyone but Galen about my family's fate on Mindoir. My squad here and back on Reach had been perceptive enough not to press me for details. Everyone except Finch. And the fucking prick loved trying to get a reaction out of me by bringing it up whenever he could.

Sensing the tension at the table Shih changed the subject. "Anyone know what the Grifball and UCC scores were last night?"

Finch frowned at her obvious attempt. "Why don't you just check on your omnitool?"

Shih shrugged and grinned "Just asking. I wanted to know if the Scott teams won."

Barrera shook her head and delivered the bad news. "Nah. I think the Stone Heads were beaten by the Elysium Furies in Grifball and the Sowilos were disqualified from their UCC for excessive force."

Shih looked crestfallen and sulked, mumbling "Terra Nova never wins anything."

With her lament successfully derailing strained course of the conversation we settled into another silent lull of eating and drinking. I glanced at the chronometer on my omnitool and checked the time. We had about ten minutes to report to the armory and get back to our corrective duty of weapons maintenance. And I somehow doubt DI Ellison would appreciate the irony us being late to a corrective duty

that we were assigned because we were late for a movement.

Having to play the leader and bearer of bad news I squeezed out the last of my nutrient paste and stood up, collecting my empty containers for recycling, "Alright we've got about ten minutes to get back to the armory." The groans coming from the rest of the squad caused me to frown as my desire to not be chewed out again boiled to the surface. "Maybe you'd all like to do this for another week?"

The groans died down into grumbles and mumbling as the squad finished their meals and grab their empties. We filed into line past the waste collection point where the mess hall VI verified our deposit of the empty containers we had been issued for dinner. It was bothersome and micromanaging to the extreme, but the UNSC was nothing if not meticulous in making sure we were properly fed in order to maximize not only the training but to help fuel the genetic augmentations that we were still undergoing. The increases in strength, speed and dexterity were barely noticeable, and honestly could be more attributed to the nearly half a year of physical training. The majority of our genetic augmentation would not be obvious in our performances until about a year after the therapy began. So for ground pounders like us, we'd be well into our first duty stations before the effects kicked in.

Once we had were all outside the mess hall we formed up into a line and I marched us the short distance to the armory. It was a pain in the ass to have to do this to go anywhere but TF3 wasn't just for training recruits like us. We shared the base and all of it's facilities with other classes made of far higher ranking officers and NCOs here for advanced training in light infantry. Most of them viewed us as a nuisance in their way but some chose to go out of their way to join in on our training by scolding or reprimanding us for the slightest infraction.

In fact, since our first week here some Marine Lieutenant Colonel had made it his duty to ensure we all knew how to properly address and answer an officer of his stature. If he saw any of us he made it a priority that we crossed paths so he could gauge our discipline and understanding of military etiquette. And as much as I wanted to blame it on him being an asshole, or a stickler for rules having nothing better to do, we did have to shoulder the blame. Or rather Finch did. Obviously. After the first encounter, Finch had mumbled something derogatory about the Lieutenant Colonel that his hearing caught. Needless to say, he was less than impressed and had harbored a grudge since.

So yet another reason to love Finch.

Thankfully we managed to arrive at the armory with a few minutes to spare and no unscheduled inspections. DI Ellison was waiting on us near the entrance to the armory with her omnitool active. As she saw us approach she checked her omnitool one more time before deactivating it and nodding her head in approval "You're early. Excellent. It would appear this corrective training is working wonders already." She lost her jovial, for her at least, attitude and bellowed in her best drill instructor voice "What are you here to learn, recruits?"

As one we roared back our answer "Be where we are supposed to be when we're supposed to be there, drill instructor!"

She folded her arms and nodded with satisfaction "Absolutely, recruits." She tilted her head to look back at the armory and back at us "As a bonus you are earning hands on experience servicing a variety of weapons under the supervision of a certified master armorer."

Resuming her lecturing mode she continued "Let that be another free lesson for all of you. Failure is never the end. It's just one more step along the way. As long as you're still breathing then you can turn any situation to your advantage if you learn from your mistakes."

The armorer, Staff Petty Officer Robinson, leaned against the door to the armory observing and waiting for us to be placed under his command so he could put us to work.

DI Ellison looked to her comrade "They're all yours. Try not to kill them. They charge me if we lose them."

SPO Robinson grinned at the humor and teased her back "You're just saying that because you don't like other people playing with your toys."

She laughed and nodded "You know it, Eric." Glancing back at us she gave us one last order "Same drill as usual. Report back to the barracks promptly after being released. Do not let me find out someone else found you nitwits gallivanting around."

Once she had glared at us one final time she wandered off. No doubt looking to terrorize the rest of the platoon. Thankfully we wouldn't have to partake in that bit of joy. Instead my squad had three hours of mind numbing monotonous work ahead of us cleaning and servicing weapons. Not even bothering to say a word, SPO Robinson stood aside as way of an invitation to join him in the armory.

The only part about this punishment that you could call good was the fact that the armorer was a man of few words. Aside from having to inspect our work or instruct us on particularly difficult tasks the man opted to keep his armory unnervingly silent. Well, that is if you didn't count the sounds of tools, fabricators and weapons being disassembled and reassembled.

But after a few days I had become accustomed to the environment and had found my own rhythm. Moving towards the workbench that I had more or less made my own I saw that an M739 had been laid out, ready for me to work on.

Once I had broken it down it's basic components I set about visually inspecting each piece for damage. The massive amounts of energy used in modern firearms was stressful on the weapons, requiring frequent maintenance and repairs. There were computerized systems that managed everything from targeting and firing to syncing with omnitools and sensor suites in armor. There were the heat management systems which tried to prevent the weapon from overheating and causing severe damage to itself or the user. Stabilizers and environmental systems helped compensate for the kick of a mass accelerated weapon and protected it in all manner of situations a Marine or Army grunt would find themselves in. Then there were the all the collapsing parts that made storage and carrying the weapons easier. And finally there was

the heart and soul of the weapon: magnetic acceleration rails and an eezo core powered by a high capacity power cell. A small chip of metal was shaved off the loaded ammo block and hit with a mass reduction field. Then that lightened 'round' was subjected to the magnetic forces caused between the rails when they were activated, speeding it up to levels that archaic conventional chemical based firearms could never achieve.

All in all, these weapons were instruments of incredible damage but capable of having a million things go wrong with them. And that's why servicing them could be a pain.

This particular model was designed to a man portable death storm. Nicknamed the Typhoon, because it unleashed an onslaught of projectiles not unlike foolishly standing outside in the middle of massive storm, it was capable of sustaining impressive firepower. We'd been trained extensively on it since our arrival here in TF3 and that had given another insight into the weapon. It chewed through parts as fast as it did shielding and armor.

And this one had chewed through it's rails.

Knowing I'd need to inform the armorer of the problem before fabricating new rails, I called him over. "Staff Petty Officer Robinson, these rails need replacing."

He put down the M99 Valiant Sniper Rifle he was working on and ambled over. Taking the parts in question in his hands he began turning them over and observed them with a practiced and critical eye. Nodding his agreement, he shifted them into his left hand so he could activate his omnitool and scanned the weapon's CPU and eezo core to verify the serial numbers for records and purchases.

Since the weapon was made my Misriah Armory exclusively for the UNSC, this allowed us or any other unit that carried these weapons to fabricate replacement parts. A fee was assigned to the unit's account corresponding with the price for the licensing to create the piece the FRM registered.

As I watched the fabricator warm up and begin creating the new rails I contemplated just how people got along before this technology. It was unfathomable. This system was a lifesaver for a society stretched out across the stars or traveling between them.

Colonists didn't need to wait for resupply trips. Ships could perform their own maintenance during a trip. Businesses in every corner of the galaxy could provide goods and services no matter the location. And our military was not as dependent upon logistical supply lines.

And that's just the people who played by the rules. Just doing a basic search of the extranet revealed a myriad of ways people around the galaxy had for hacking and nullifying the protections of FRM. Illegal fabrication was nearly as big an industry as it's legal counterpart. You just needed the technical expertise and raw materials.

Figures, right? The more obstacles you put in the way, the more creative people get in avoiding them.

After ten minutes the fabricator chirped to let me know the job was done and the rails were finished. Since they would still be too hot to handle I spent my time scanning them for defects. Even a fabricator gets it wrong from time to time.

Satisfied they were up to standard for being placed in a military grade automatic weapon I put on a pair of safety mitts and retrieved the rails. Taking them back to the workbench I began cleaning and preparing all parts for the process of reassembling.

I zoned out in the silence, letting my hands move in a practiced drill that DI Ellison had us do what seemed like every day on random weapons. M392 Sabers. M7 Hurricanes. M5 Harriers. M739 Typhoons. M6 Phalanges. M55 Arguses. M45 Crusaders. M37 Falcons. M41 Cobras. M920 Cains. M99 Valiants.

A few minutes later I was finished and complete M739 Typhoon Light Machine Gun rested on the workbench, ready to be tested. Picking it up and careful to keep it aimed at the floor I activated my omnitool and paired it with the weapon. It sprang to life, the eezo core and power cell creating a slight hum and tingle in my arm. Subtle enough that most people wielding the weapon wouldn't realize it, or if they did they learned to ignore it over time. But that just wasn't the case for a biotic like myself. The activation was sending a constant thrum of power through my body, tingling my own eezo nodules and creating a not unpleasant sensation that traveled up my spine to the base of my skull.

Shaking off the daze of my self examination I got back to the business of running a few diagnostics. The weapon cycled through various testing functions and sent readouts to my omnitool which I carefully examined. When they were done I was sure the weapon was operational and ready to be inspected. I deactivated the weapon and deleted the sync from my omnitool before calling SPO Robinson over one more time "This one's done, Petty Officer."

He nodded and put down a M392, causing me to frown at how fast he must have been working... or maybe how slow I was. He snatched up the LMG from my workbench and gave it another quick visual inspection. Apparently satisfied with what he saw he paired his omnitool with the activated weapon and aimed it the ceiling. The earpiece he wore over his left ear activated as well, creating a small HUD that appeared over his left eye. Information from the diagnostics he was running began streaming across the HUD and he shifted his aim, slowly training the barrel at invisible targets in the ceiling. All the time his lips silently moved as he mouthed what he read.

As this dragged on I stood by nervously, each passing moment allowing me to run through all the steps I had taken and remember if I had forgotten anything. Maybe I had made a mistake?

"Good work, recruit." SPO Robinson abruptly shut off the weapon and his devices. Shouldering the weapon he walked away and carried towards the weapons lockers. I breathed a small sigh of relief with his back turned but froze as I saw him return with a pair of M5 Harrier Assault Rifles.

Dumping them on my workbench he paid me faint praise as he doubled my workload. "You've got a real talent for this, recruit. Keep up the good work and you should have these two finished before you leave

tonight."

Without another word he sauntered back to his own workbench. Glaring at his back I lamented the reward for my diligence. The pattern I'd seen so far in the UNSC was that success and talent were met with increased responsibility and greater expectations. And at times like this that really sucked.

Sighing and resigning myself to my fate I grabbed the first Harrier and began inspecting the weapon, but before I could even focus I heard someone stifling their sniggers.

Frowning, I glanced over my right shoulder and saw my squad were in various stages of mirth at my expense. Galen was making ridiculous kissy faces at me. Kekoa was pressing his tongue against the inside of his cheek and using his hand to simulate sucking a cock. Barrera was suggestively stroking the barrel of the rifle she was servicing while winking and mockingly mouthing 'You're so awesome, Shepard.' In fact, all of them seemed to be doing a variation of some sort of lewd or childish taunting. Except for Finch, who was glaring at me out of the corner of his eye and mumbling something that suspiciously looked like 'Fucking kissass.'

Snarling and shaking my head I once again questioned my choice in shouldering the blame for this group of idiots. Breathing out a calming sigh, I went to activate my omnitool so I could scan the Harrier but before I even could touch it a new message alert displayed.

Jerking my hand back at the coincidental shock of the moment I nervously wondered who would be sending me a message right now? I regularly sent mail and messages to my family. I'd even shared a few messages with Anna from UCMT, but it's not like I was a social butterfly.

I glanced in SPO Robinson's direction, but he hadn't paid any heed to the sound of my omnitool. So I quickly opened the message and was surprised to see it was from Vercesi. Suspicious of the contents I turned my head to glare his direction but he was doing his best to seem engrossed in his work. Emphasis on doing his best, which was very good at all.

Opening the message and my suspicions were confirmed.

```
[ \ Andrew M Vercesi [A] XTai Shanxi [to] Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg  
Bekenstein \ ]
```

```
[ \ Luis Shepard, you're just so talented. You're my hero. \ ]
```

My face must have gone red because it felt embarrassingly warm. Glaring his direction I was rewarded with a truly horrific display. He was batting his eyes coquettishly at me and pouting in a way that I think was supposed to be flirtatious but it came across as demented.

"You want to quit making fuck faces to each other and get back to work? Or would you like to add another night here?" SPO Robinson's rebuke brought a quick and sobering end to all of our antics. As he stood by his own workbench glowering at each of us I complied but couldn't help but grin to myself. It was moments like this that made

me want to shoulder the blame for this group of idiots. My idiots. My squad.

* * *

><p>Earth Orbit, Earth, Sol System, Local Interstellar Cluster; November 23rd, 2572 [Standardized Terran Calendar], 0752 [Local Time, Terran Standard]

Normally I would have been thrilled to skip PT in the morning. Mostly because I was delusional and believed that meant I would get to sleep in. But in the UNSC there was no such luck. In fact, skipping morning PT was something of a warning sign. Drill Instructors never missed an opportunity to run us into the ground unless there was something worse they could have us doing. Much, much worse.

Like taking a dropship trip into orbit. Nothing like starting off your day with the gut wrenching feeling of escape velocity.

Thankfully that was behind us and even more fortunately, our specific dropship was vomit free. Today's exercise was for our introduction into microgravity training. We had no clue where we were headed but knowing the UNSC and DI Ellison my bets were on us just being shoved out the troop bay of the Pelican and told not to die.

It was eery how in sync my mind was with my squadmates as Shih voiced the same thing I had been thinking, "So, you guys don't think they'd shove us out into vacuum, right? They're not that crazy."

The silence that greeted her let us all know none of us were willing to take that bet.

The crewman for the Pelican, strapped into her seat near the door to the cockpit rolled her eyes at our discussion. Granted, this may be an everyday occurrence to her, going in and out of orbit, but for the majority of us we'd never even left the gravity home planets. And the UNSC hadn't exactly proven to any of us that they were above some really harsh hands on training.

"You think we trust you imbeciles to not kill yourselves? I'm genuinely shocked half of you can breathe without a constant reminder." DI Ellison's voice rang out over the comms in my helmet, letting me know that even in another Pelican she could hear what we were saying. "You'll be inside an Air Force frigate so try to not embarrass me or I will space you and you can have a chat with Saint Elisa over the finer aspects of dying in vacuum with dignity."

I frowned at that tidbit of information. Well, not the bit about being spaced. Those sort of death threats get old. The bit about being aboard an Air Force frigate. This might be a bit more entertaining than I had originally thought. Plus there was an emphasis on the word inside. As in, not in vacuum. That's certainly a bonus.

"Final Approach with UNSC FSD-497 Red Cliffs coming up." The pilot's warning was a welcome response. The sooner I got out of this bucket and inside of something a bit more substantial the better I'd feel.

The dropship shuddered and I could feel the jolt as it slowed down and entered the Frigate's vehicle bay. There was a final thump and jolt as the Pelican was gripped in the overhead clamps and the engines powered down. The red light illuminating the interior of the troop bay was shut off and the rear door opened to let in fresh air and light.

"Boarding complete. Please return your seats to the upright position and retrieve your belongings. A stewardess will be along shortly to direct you towards the exit. Enjoy your training aboard the UNSC Air Force Red Cliffs and we look forward to returning you to Earth aboard Stomach Knots Orbital Flights."

The pilot's upbeat and chirpy remark got a laugh out of the two squads aboard the Pelican. As we removed our harnesses the Flight Crewman stood and gave an absolutely filthy look back at the cockpit, yelling loudly so her pilot could hear her displeasure "I got your stewardess right here, asshole."

Outside we could hear the other two squads already stretching out their legs inside the vehicle bay and DI Ellison's voice yelling for us to join them. "Look alive, bravos. File out and form up. Now!"

We quickly grabbed our gear, which was only our rucks, and rushed outside to form up with the rest of our platoon. Our Drill Instructor was already standing in front, her helmet off and scowling. Once formed up she spun on her heel and stood at attention. A woman with red hair in bun wearing an officer's dress uniform marched forward to meet her. When they were face to face they exchanged salutes and pleasantries. "Welcome aboard, Sergeant."

"Ma'am. We appreciate the opportunity to train aboard your vessel."

The woman glanced over DI Ellison's shoulder and smiled "My pleasure to be a part of the forging of the next generation of shit kickers and planet stompers." Walking around the DI she maintained her smile, giving the appearance of a mother more than the commander of a UNSC warship, but her pleasantness belied the steel in her voice.

"Recruits, aboard this vessel my command is law. If I or my staff tell you to do something then you do it. Learning how to operate in microgravity is a vital component of military training. Wars are fought in all places under all conditions. Now you shouldn't feel too down if you don't get the hang of this today. It's an acquired skill. The good lord gave us feet that were meant to be on the ground of a planet with one G. So think of this as learning to swim, but instead of the ocean blue you're going to master movement in the abyss black."

Giving a curt nod our direction, she turned around and gave a very jarring and loud whistle. Four crew members of the ship came running forward and stood at attention awaiting her orders. She smiled at DI Ellison and gestured to the four crew members. "Sergeant, I've got four of my best NCO's to help as requested. Each of them with years of experience aboard ships like this or stations. Between the four of them they've got enough space walks, battle drills and training exercises under their belt to equal a lifetime spent in less than one G."

Ellison nodded, pleased with the officer's generosity. "Thank you,

ma'am." She turned and looked at us and pointed to a NCO. "First. Second. Third. Fourth. You know the drill. Listen to them and learn."

We filed out and followed our assigned NCO, an African woman in standard UNSC MCU, around the Pelicans and towards a doorway. She tapped the haptic interface and the door slid open to reveal a small and cramped staircase leading up. Almost as one we all glanced back at the others and saw them waiting with their NCO's near the doors for the elevators. The NCO saw this and jerked her head towards the stairs. "Trust me. You do not want to be cramped in there with all those people on that slow elevator. Besides, we only have to go up one deck."

Grumbling we obliged and followed her up to the next deck where we exited into a side hallway. She then instructed us to follow her and stay to one side of the hallway so as not to obstruct traffic. Not there was any. It was hard to tell there was anyone else on this ship besides the random maintenance drone flying around.

I took the opportunity to observe the inner workings of a real UNSC warship. The only other time I had been aboard one was the Einstein and I hadn't really paid much attention. Looking around I realized I hadn't really missed much. Just lots and lots of metallic walls with red and green stripes or lights. The odd door here and there. Markings telling us this was the fourth deck and that the crew lived on this deck.

Entering a large hallway we came to a stop. Looking down either direction it was clear to see that it stretched from the rear of the ship all the way to the front. I wasn't an expert of warships, but this had to be clearing a hundred meters easily. The NCO cleared her throat to get our attention and when she had it she explained "I'm Petty Officer Lefebvre and this is the main corridor of the crew deck for this frigate. It's a Stalwart Class, the smallest we make frigates. Designed to be light enough to operate in atmosphere of most planets this ship is just shy of four hundred meters long, making this corridor nearly three hundred. Above us are the command decks and the MAC battery. During combat operations, to help reduce excess heat and static production all unnecessary systems are shut off. Like the A Plates that provide gravity."

She walked a bit of the way down the hall gesturing at different portions as a way of giving us a quick rundown. "Now pay attention. In order to help you figure your way around a ship or space station when gravity is offline the Systems Alliance has standardized markings and lights for all human made facilities and vessels. If you look at your feet you will see the ground has yellow markings and lights. That is nadir. Above your heads there are white markings and lights. That is zenith."

Sure enough I looked above and below me and there were various markings done in different colors along the hallway. In addition to the white and yellow there were blue, green, red and orange. Petty Officer Lefebvre continued her rapid introduction. "To the left is planetside marked in red. Right, starboard in green. Front of the ship is the bow marked in blue. And rear of the ship is the stern marked in orange."

Her lecture was halted by her omnitool pinging with a message alert.

She quickly read it and nodded to herself. Deactivating the omnitool she quickly barked out orders. "Gravity systems will be going offline shortly for a combat drill. Spread out and brace yourselves on either side of the hallway. Cmon, split up and spread out. Get plenty of space between you and the next recruit. Palms flat against the wall and feet firmly planted on the deck. Do not make any sudden movements. Do not push your self off any surfaces. You're going to get a head rush and some nausea. That's perfectly fine. Remember the training you've been given and keep calm. Get adjusted to the feeling of microgravity and learn to work your gloves and boots."

Following her advice I planted my back against the left side of the hallway. The one with red markings. Planetside, I think? The rest of my squad did the same, finding a spot along the left and right of the hallway.

We waited in silent anticipation for the drill to commence and gravity to be shut off. The nervousness making the palms and soles of my feet tingle as I had very little idea of what to expect. I nearly jumped in fright when the VI for the ship announced the countdown for systems going offline over the intercom. The smooth but synthetic sounding female voice ratcheted up the tension with each number. _"Combat drill commencing. Secure loose items and return to your assigned station. Non vital systems going offline in ten. Nine. Eight. Seven. Six. Five. Four. Three. Two. One. Non vital systems offline."_

The lighting in the hallway dimmed and the emergency lights came on showcasing the various color schemes for directions the Petty Officer had described.

Well, that was anti climactic. I mean, I could feel a difference, mostly in my head but I'd yet to move, or really see anyone else move. Petty Officer Lefebvre remained standing firm in the center of the hallway, her arms folded as she observed us. "Artificial gravity has been disabled. Since none of you are flying around that means your boots and gloves have activated and are keeping you in place just as mine are. Now I want you to lift a foot off the deck and place it on the wall. Repeat that with the other leg. Then remove your hands and try to stand up."

Doing as I was told I lifted my left foot and felt a bit of a tug trying to move it off the deck. It wasn't a strong feeling, more like lifting your foot out of a mud puddle. When my foot was about to make contact with the surface of the wall behind me there was a slight pull that caused my foot to connect with the wall a bit stronger than I was aiming for. The magnetic strips in the boots would try to keep track of my foot's movements and activate or deactivate when needed. I'd done some training with them in UCMT and MVC, but I'd never used them like this.

Performing the same action with my right foot was met with the same sensation, although I managed to avoid having my foot yanked to the surface this time by being more sure in my movements. A jubilant voice caught my attention and I saw Galen standing along the right side wall. He was wobbling slightly, unable to maintain his erect posture, but if he was upset at that it didn't show. "Hell yeah!"

Eager to feel that sensation myself, I made to remove my hands from

the wall but unlike my feet these were a bit more persistent in keeping their hold. Remembering the training we had undergone with these gloves, I relaxed my hand slightly and the hold on wall was released. Rising up I found how unsteady it was to work my body when there was no gravity to assist me. There was no up and there was no down. Any attempt to brace myself and shift my weight pushed me too much in one direction that I compensated and went in another.

"Get the feel for moving in this environment and your gear. Take your time." I followed her advice and tried to experiment with the weightlessness. My head was throbbing, like I was getting a sinus infection or something. Trying to blink away the pressure caused me to feel instantly nauseous and disoriented. I reflexively reached out to steady myself and nearly bent over at the waist.

"Relax, recruits. You've been trained on this. You know what to expect. It's going to take some getting used to, but eventually you'll be able to operate in microgravity with no problems." The Petty Officer, despite her attempts to reassure us, was eyeing the entire group warily. The wondrous murmurs and excited yelling had all died down to heavy breathing and groaning.

Guess everyone else felt as bad as I did.

"Just breathe, recruits. Relax." She kept repeating her mantra and I kind of got the impression she was doing it more for her own benefit. Who knows? Maybe she had a bet going with the other crew members on who could have the least amount of recruits puke up their breakfast.

Oh who the hell am I kidding? If they had a bet going it would be to see who could make the most recruits puke up their breakfast.

Trying to focus on the meditation exercises Matron Malegos had taught me I closed my eyes, relaxed my body and focused on my breathing. Breathe in. Try not to throw up. Breathe out. Ignore the feeling of falling. Breathe in. Don't think about my sinuses swelling. Breathe out. Keep myself calm.

"That's it recruits. Just breathe. Relax." Okay, she was starting to get annoyingly repetitive. We get it. Breathe. Relax. It's kind of difficult to do when someone is saying that every few seconds.

"If I relax anymore I'm going to fall asleep." I suppressed the urge to groan. Leave it to Finch to run his mouth and to someone who was not part of our training unit. All she had to do was mention how rude our squad was and we'd be toast. We'd be lucky if DI Ellison didn't murder us here on the frigate and then toss our bodies out the airlock.

"Oh, good. Then you're ready to move on. Unless you'd like to repeat this block of instruction?" Fuck. She was keeping her temper but the tone of her voice left little doubt she wasn't very amused with Finch's remark.

"No, that's fine." Again, Finch's reply was glib and insubordinate and if I could move with any efficiency I would be heading in his direction to kick his ass. I cracked an eye open and saw that the rest of the squad was scowling in his direction.

"No, that's fine...?" The Petty Officer apparently wasn't having his shit. She was going to make a point about rank and respect.

Finch was his usual petulant self, being hesitant to admit defeat or submit to authority. Now my breathing exercises were less about staving off nausea and more about preventing my own temper from flaring.

But on the bright side, I was so annoyed that I wasn't really able to notice the swelling or need to vomit anymore. So every cloud has it's eezo lining?

"No, that's fine, Petty Officer."

As begrudging as his reply was, the Petty Officer seemed to be satisfied with his acceptance of who was in charge here. "Good. I want you all to begin moving around. We'll spend the next ten minutes performing drills. First you'll work on walking around on the surfaces of the hallway. Then we'll work on you being able to transfer from surface to surface by jumping." She grinned at this point and looked over her shoulder towards the far end of the hallway. "We'll finish with all of you taking a trip down the hallway and back."

It's funny how your perspective can change within just a few minutes. While I thought the hallway was pretty long before, it wasn't something I wouldn't think twice about if you told me to walk down it. Hell, given the way the UNSC had conditioned me, I'd be happy that you didn't tell me to sprint down it. But to move down it in microgravity? That was daunting.

She had us start off slowly, walking along all the surfaces of the hallways. Then we moved on to changing directions by flipping around. Kicking off with our feet to launch ourselves from one side to the other. Or using only our hands to grip and pull ourselves in any direction.

Despite my earlier apprehension, and Finch's attitude, this might be one of my favorite classes since I'd joined the UNSC. This was more fun than anything I'd done. Almost like recess when I was a kid. Even the trip up and down the corridor wasn't as bad as I had expected, although my joints were starting to feel a bit sore from the impact of having to stop and control my movements in the absence of conventional or artificial gravity.

After nearly two hours she drew our training to a close "Well, by my omnitool we should have about five more minutes before the drill is complete and gravity is restored. So take this time to just fool around. Get a bit more acquainted with your capabilities but nothing crazy. I don't want to see you trying to do backflips into standing on the opposite wall or something."

Naturally, we behaved like children.

I was busy trying to emulate a move I'd seen an Asari Commando perform in a vid once. It was probably all assisted or added in digitally but she ran along the side of the wall to get around a mech and landed behind it. Of course my attempt, even in microgravity, looked ridiculous and uncoordinated.

All around me it seems my squad mates were having just as much success, and interacting in typical ways.

"I swear to Vishnu, Donat. If you fucking touch me again I'm going to punch the shit out of you."

"Stop. Bumping. Into. Me. Griz."

"Like I want to touch you, jackass."

"Seriously? You're just going to move in front of me like that?"

"Fuck off. You wandered into my space."

"Hey guys, look at this... shit, nevermind."

"What the hell was that supposed to be?"

I rolled my eyes and glanced at the Petty Officer who was standing around watching the chronometer on her omnitool but had the widest grin on her face. Well, at least our display of stupidity amused someone.

Focusing on trying my vid move one more time I was crashed into from behind. After getting a face full of space ship grade metal, I glanced behind me to see Galen looking apologetic. "Shit. I'm sorry man. You alright?"

Rolling my eyes I nodded and went to separate myself from him. We moved apart, but his hand stayed attached to the lower back plates of my armor. I frowned, glaring over my shoulder at his hand, "Dude. Your hand."

He frowned and tried releasing but his glove remained anchored. "Trying."

By this point we had drawn attention from the rest of the squad and the Petty Officer because this wasn't embarrassing at all. "Seriously, Galen. Let go of my ass."

Galen glared at me and finally yank his hand free. Retaining his glower he snarled, just as embarrassed as I was "You think I was doing that on purpose?"

"I dunno. You two are always cozy together." Barrera had a huge smile on her face as she reveled in our discomfort.

"No we aren't!"

"We do not!"

Our simultaneous childish denials just made the situation worse as the entire squad laughed at our expense. Even Petty Officer Lefebvre was chuckling as she brought our training to a close. "Okay, if you're all done screwing around we have about thirty seconds or so before the warning should come. Let's get our feet back on nadir."

As we readied ourselves for the end of the drill and resuming of

artificial gravity all I could think about was up until that point this had been my favorite training exercise.

* * *

><p>UNSC Training Facility Three, Omsk Oblast, Russian Federal Republic, Earth, Sol System, Local Interstellar Cluster; November 29th, 2572 [Standardized Terran Calendar], 2052 [Local Time, Terran Standard]

For what seemed like the millionth time I glanced over my shoulder at the laundry machine containing my clothes. The heat generated in the room could be intense but I found a nice comfortable spot next to the open doorway where the cold air outside cooled the room off just enough. My fight against drowsiness was a lost cause between the oppressive heat and Anna droning on and on about some event that happened during her flight training. Something about mistakes during a checklist. I wasn't really paying attention.

Watching the snow flurries fall and coat the grounds of TF3 in white was definitely mesmerizing. Not at all something I was used to. I could almost appreciate the fond memories and feelings people associated with the snow and winter. Almost. I still hated the cold and I dreaded having to get up tomorrow morning and go running in this.

The near silence that accompanied the calm scene was welcome. Only the rhythmic thumping of the machine as it spun my laundry around and somehow that seemed to fit right in place in lulling me to sleep. Perfect time to wind down and let my mind wander.

What was I thinking about before? Something about Anna talking about flight checklists and... crap. She'd gone silent on her end, no doubt wondering why I wasn't really participating in the conversation. I cleared my throat and lamely tried to pretend like I had been paying attention "Yeah. That sounds crazy."

"You're not even paying attention, are you?" I winced at her tone. We'd been exchanging mails, messages and calls throughout our time in MVC. It had helped to break up the monotony but on nights like this it felt more like a chore than a chat with a friend.

I rubbed the back of my neck, fingering the biotic amp and neural interface ports. It wouldn't help to lie further so I went for honesty. "Yeah. Sorry. I'm worn out and doing some laundry before I hit the rack. DI Ellison ran us into the ground doing hand to hand and clearing drills today. Didn't help we had another cryostasis overnighter."

She made a disapproving noise in the back of her throat and I could just imagine that mockingly disappointed look on her face. The one she'd made all the time in UCMT whenever I did something stupid, which was twice a day or more. "So, lose any good socks to the intergalactic laundry gremlins lately?"

Frowning at her remark I instinctively looked back the laundry machine and shook my head. "No. Not since I first got here."

"You're waiting next to the machines, aren't you?" Now I could hear the mirth in her voice. She always got endless amounts of amusement

out of me losing socks and then hearing DI Bramante yell at me for it.

And I wasn't exactly pleased that she knew how I was trying to prevent that from happening again. "Maybe"

No longer bothering to hide her delight at pushing my haptics she laughed her trademark loud bray that sounded more like one of the farm animals from the northside of Nouveau Basel, causing me to wince and pull the earpieces away. "You are such a loser!"

Stuffing the earpieces back in I let my annoyance loose and mocked her back "Right. I'm the loser. And how many undersuit tops have you gone through already?"

Her jovial nature evaporated as she growled back "I'm not crazy like you. I know someone in fourth platoon was taking them."

Feeling more awake I reveled in her aggravation by continuing my teasing. "Uh huh. Go on. Tell me more about this alternate theory of yours."

She went silent for a moment before blowing out a breath and grumbling, "Shut up." At my own laughter her complaints continued. "I'm not crazy. And those things are not cheap. You think the socks are bad? I have to order a special size. That's why I know someone was stealing them."

My laughter subsiding I couldn't resist teasing her one more time. "Let it go, Anna. Let it go. Still, even if it must suck to still be on Reach at least they know to keep your size in stock." Almost on cue, a strong blast of the night air hit me and dropped the comfortable temperature to something less than acceptable. I shivered and backed away deeper into the room and safety of the warmth. "Not like being here on Earth is much better. Of all the places for the UNSC to have a military base on this planet they choose Russia."

"You do realize that's where I'm from, right?" Her playful tone was gone and in it's place was a defensive growl.

Feeling more than a bit bold in the face of her and Russia's cold front I parried back "Yeah. After the first week here it all became clear why you were one of the nutjobs that didn't have a problem with the weather on Reach. This place is just as miserable."

She snorted and belittled me "You weakling. The cold never bothered me anyways. Has Russia at least toughened you up some?"

"It's made me more bitter. Does that count?" I smiled knowing I was baiting her more and more. She was particularly proud of her Russian heritage and wouldn't let my comments go by unchallenged.

"Not really. Just means you're a whiny outer colony kid. That's fine. We all can't be Russians." I chuckled at her dismissive and arrogant reply.

"You're damn right I grew up on a warm outer colony. Shepards are sensible people. We prefer tropical climates. We don't do the cold. If the temperature drops below twenty we begin complaining." Yet

again my mind wandered to thoughts of my father and if what I was saying was true.

Laughing at my professed love of warmth, because clearly she was deranged not to share it, she teased back "Oh well you'd love it where I am now. I swear I sweat more just standing around here than I ever did during a morning run back in UCMT."

I distinctly remembered how sweaty she could get, to the point she looked like she had been dumped into a river. But I couldn't recall anyplace on Reach that was warm enough, at anytime of the year there, to match that sweat output. Was she not there anymore? "Wait. You're not on Reach?"

"Nope. Hold on." Hearing her mischievous remark I grew suspicious. When she went silent for several seconds my suspicion grew into a gut feeling of complete distrust. My omnitool pinging to notify me of received correspondence only confirmed my feeling of distrust. She breathily and eagerly restarted the conversation "Check your mail."

I hesitated and contemplated just what sort of trick this might be. Anna didn't exactly have the greatest record with being trustworthy. I lost count after the second week of UCMT of how many times she played a prank on me. "This had better not be you trying to get me back for the vorchia porn or something."

Sounding indignant and playful she defended her tastes in erotica. "Please. Give me some credit. I have better taste than that. If I was going to send you porn it would be krogan. Only the classy stuff, y'know. Quad Hoppers. Can She Handle The Quad. Stuff like that."

The way she rattled off the name of krogan porn titles had me a bit concerned. She wasn't actually into that sort of stuff, was she? Opening the message on my omnitool I was dumbstruck to see a holo of Anna, tanned, lean and wearing form fitting swimwear in UNSC colors that left little to the imagination. She also looked to be in some underwater facility, posing against the backdrop of the brightly lit shallow water glowing aquamarine behind her.

Once my mind finally found it's way back into being semi functional I was at a loss as to what was the most important question to ask. Why was she in a swimsuit for MVC? Since when did the UNSC make swimwear? And why did I get the sinking feeling there was more to her decision to send me this holo than to simply show off?

Seeing movement in my peripherals broke the hold the holo had on me just in time to see that I was no longer alone in the laundry room. Finch had wandered in with his own load of uniforms and gear, but was equally entranced by Anna's holo it if his filthy grin was anything to go by.

Reminded of how he reacted to the holo of my sister Lizzy, I quickly shut the omnitool off and tried to carrying my conversation on with Anna, but I could feel Finch watching me closely while he went about his business. I turned my back to him and answered her in a lowered voice "Uh. Okay. I have no clue where you are but you get to run around in a swimsuit for MVC? What the hell is up with that?"

"Why are you whispering?" Her voice sounded confused, and a bit

apprehensive. Which makes sense, I suppose. She sent that holo and my reaction is to go all weird and speak softly.

Glancing at Finch, I saw that he was trying his hardest to look like he wasn't eavesdropping on our conversation. Seeing no choice but to move out of hearing range I ventured further towards the doorway and the cold outside. "I'm not alone anymore."

Anna didn't respond right away and I wondered if she had hung up or the connection timed out. But then I heard her blow out a noisy breath and reply, "I hate people who do that. One of the recruits in my training squadron is always listening in on conversations. I had to wander into one of the unused portions of the facility just to have some privacy."

"And just where might this facility be? Since you seem to get to run around half dressed." I chuckled at her complaining and steered the conversation back on topic.

Her voice grew warm and eager describing her current locations, "We're doing the second leg of our training based out of Proteus. They opened the training facility here not too long ago so pilots can learn to fly in bad weather and hostile conditions. I love it."

"So they let you guys just run around with free time?" The thought of having free reign during MVC was such a strange concept to me. I couldn't imagine DI Ellison letting any of us so much as take a dump without her knowing, or giving approval.

Humming affirmative she explained, "When we're not running simulations, getting flight time or learning to perform maintenance on the vehicles they sort of let us do what we want. There's really no one here. The academy was put in place only last year. We're like the second or third class to use the place."

I remembered comments from my aunt about the planet. Something about underwater colonies and consolations to the hanar over prothean ruins. "Yeah I had remembered hearing about the colonization efforts being opened up there recently. So you guys are part of the first wave?"

She must have entered a large room because her footsteps were echoing in my earpieces. The footsteps came to a halt and she spoke, her words now echoing, "Yep. Between Proteus and Therum over in Knossos they figure there is going to be a big enough population and supply of resources in the future to validate laying down the foundation for larger defense forces. Then there's the volus interest in Patavig. That's not even counting how this cluster is deep in the Verge. They know the fight is coming here."

My cynical side wanted to mention that the fight had already been brought to the Maroon Sea and Mindoir. And that credits were not going towards the long promised defense of my home world was making my blood boil. Enough to offset the chill from the night air against my skin. Still, I knew better than to take my frustrations out on Anna so I held back on my vitriol and chose to be snarky about her outfit, "So they let you guys run around like you're on vacation during your downtime? You sure this is MVC and not a resort?"

"Positive. The flight training is intense but I guess that's to be expected. The UNSC isn't going to trust us to fly their toys unless we're vetted. But it's so worth it to get out into the atmosphere or vacuum." Her voice came alive as she began talking about her love of flying. Her joy and enthusiasm was infectious, enough to bring me out of my funk over politics.

I still couldn't help but feel a bit skeptical about how tough her MVC was if the dress code was that relaxed. "And there's no problem with the way you guys dress?"

She chuckled, clearly finding my comments amusing. "If you weren't too busy ogling the clearly awesome woman in the swimwear you might have noticed the color scheme? They issue them to us." My jaw dropped at that bit of info. Now I was really upset and somehow without even being able to see me she knew it. Her chuckle became more prominent as she continued, "We're living full time in these underwater facilities. Clear domes and big windows close enough to the surface that we get plenty of sunlight. More than enough to get a good tan. A lot of our PT is swimming and sometimes when the weather is calm we get to fly to some random island to do some running on real terrain. There's always thick cloud cover even on the best of days so we won't get microwaved by Athens."

Wonderful. It did sound like she was on vacation instead of in training. Looking out across the snow covered landscape around TF3 I longer felt the need to hide my jealousy. "Well that sounds loads better than what we've got here. Want to switch?"

She laughed and it echoed throughout the room she was in. When nothing really followed but an awkward silence I began to worry but her voice returned it was hesitant, and a bit nervous. "So what did you think?"

My mind was lost at her comment but the suspicions were creeping back to the forefront. What did I think about what? The fact she was having a much better time in MVC than I was?

Since I had yet to answer her she huffed and clarified, a bit exasperated. "The holo?"

I froze, realizing this conversation was about to take a turn towards a topic I wasn't really sure we should be having. At least not over a long distance call. Anna was clearly an attractive woman, and it's not like I'd never noticed that, or seen what was under that swimsuit, but I'd never really thought about her that way. Maybe that was part of the reason for UCMT being such an exhausting and shocking introduction to the military? Wear you down so you didn't have the energy or time to do anything but what you were told. It would make sense since you had dozens of hormone crazed teens living together. But now that there was some time to reevaluate my peers I wasn't sure what to make of this. Was she flirting with me? Was this just teasing? Did she actually like me? After what happened with Wajiah and Ilyse I was feeling more than a bit unsure that might ever be able to tell the difference.

Of course being the coward I was I chose to deflect with humor rather than ask her, but only after I had nervously looked over my shoulder to verify Finch wasn't listening again. "Oh. Well, you look fantastic in it but I don't think it's really me. Not my color or cut."

Anna's sharp bark of laughter was punctuated by her gasping for breath between her giggles. "Ha! I'm sure. You clearly need red to bring out your eyes." I nearly sucked in a breath, believing that my attempt to divert the conversation hadn't worked and she was going to carry on with her aggressive flirtations. But when she didn't really seem to push the issue I let that breath go. "So you guys haven't been able to head out into Omsk or anyplace else?"

"Only for training. Although I hear we get an overnight pass to head out into Omsk once we graduate." I answered her, not clear why she moved on to this topic but nevertheless relieved. I still wasn't exactly sure about what to do with this situation, but I knew I wasn't looking for a girlfriend. And definitely not one that was long distance. But I was getting ahead of myself. This was all purely hypothetical based on an assumption that she was even serious in her flirtations or wanted a relationship.

Or I was imaging this and confusing myself. Maybe it's best I keep quiet before I top this off with embarrassing myself too.

"Oh, well at least you get that. When do you graduate?" Anna's inquisitive question threw me for a loop yet again, especially after her pointed flirtations earlier. Which was sort of the reason I was weary of her behavior and what it meant to begin with.

Still the change in topic made me sour and a bit apprehensive. Not only would we be leaving training within a week, but we had our final examination coming up. "Little over a week. Final eval is on Titan."

Anna sucked in breath and I didn't blame her. By now most recruits had heard about the Titan proving and training grounds. DI Ellison had been going on for the past week about how it was going to separate the wheat from the chaff for us. "Yeah. All we keep on hearing from people around here is that our eval on Titan is brutal. Live fire war game in a hostile environment."

She blew out the breath in a low whistle, taken aback by what was expected of bravos. "We did some extended wilderness and survival training on Reach to simulate being shot down but nothing that bad."

We settled into another long pause, the sounds of the laundry room and Finch moving about the only thing to hear. My attention drawn back to him I made sure he wasn't anywhere near my machine. It's not that I thought he was a thief, but I wanted to make sure there were no chances that a sock came up missing.

"So any plans for you graduation? Your family coming down?" Anna's voice drew me back into the conversation, and an unpleasant topic.

Well, not unexpected either. Everyone in my family was too far away, or too busy to take time off. It stung a bit to know that no one would be coming for my graduation, but I consoled myself that this wasn't something that major anyways. Just about everyone in the platoon was in the same situation and would not have guests for the graduation.

Abuela had been asked to attend a series of private hearings involving the Nashan scandal at the behest of shareholders and some of the executives not directly linked to the kickbacks. Since she was going to be busy, and Abuelo and I were not on speaking terms still, they could be scratched off the list for attending. Ari wasn't about to take a transport here on her own and Lizzy had yet to do more than exchange mail with me. My aunt and uncles were tens of thousands of light years away and this really didn't warrant them fitting a week long trip into their busy schedules.

In fact, about the only person who probably could attend was Bisabuela Elvira. And I wasn't too keen to have her there without other family members to reign her in. I could only imagine what she would consider words of praise.

"Uh, no. Something came up and they won't be able to make it." I frowned at how defensive I sounded and quickly amended statement, affecting a more laid back tone. "Which is fine. Doesn't make sense for them to travel half way across the galaxy for a short ceremony and one night."

"Oh. Well that sucks." Anna sounded crestfallen at my bad luck, which oddly made me feel... special? I don't know what to make of that in light of her earlier behavior.

Again keeping up an air of bravado to avoid talks about my feelings I continued on, "It's fine. It'll just be me and Galen out on the town for the night. See if Russia is ready for Kemp and Shepard."

"This lady of Russia can say she wasn't that impressed after extended time spent around the two of you." There we go. That was the deadpan snark directed my way from her that I was used to. Of course Galen was tossed out the airlock with me, but what he didn't know won't hurt him. "So, you guys are just goofing around or are you really going to try and get laid in Omsk?"

Now that really threw me. Was she fishing for information or genuinely curious? Unsure what her angle was I cautiously replied. "Who knows?"

"I could give you some pointers." Her calm and helpful tone really left me lost. Was this a test? Or a game? If I said yes she gets upset? Or if I say no she thinks I'm interested? And why was I giving this that much thought when she wasn't my girlfriend? "I'll just send you some stuff later on."

Skeptical if this was some prank or game I pressed her. "You sure about this?"

"Yeah. No problem. We're all UNSC, right?" Well she sounded genuine. Not sure if that was a function of this just being an audio chat or what. Not being able to see her face made it difficult to tell if she was playing with me. Her tone then turned sultry, suggestive, and directed at me with no subtlety, "I fully expect you to help me with my Spanish. If I run across any hot latin guys or girls I need to know how to talk dirty with them."

Screwing up my face I wondered if that was her ulterior motive. Teach me to say some things in Russian so I could say them to her? Or I could be paranoid and egotistical thinking this was all about me.

"What exactly are you going to send me?"

"Cultural stuff. Double entendre. Euphemisms. Things that a translator wouldn't fully understand unless you paid for a professional VI." Her cool and calm response didn't reassure me but if she was being honest then this was pretty awesome.

At that moment the buzzer went off for my machine, startling Finch who looked like he had fallen asleep leaning against the wall. Figuring this was as good a time as any to end the conversation I let Anna know, "Hey, my laundry is done. I'm gonna fold it and then get some sleep."

"Oh. Yeah. Sure. I should probably get some sleep too." She tried to sound upbeat and indifferent but I could hear the disappointment in her voice.

It occurred to me that I never asked her much about Proteus itself. Like what time it was. "Is it late there?"

Her grunt and groan accompanied her reply, "Worst thing about this planet. Fifty one and a half hour days."

Holy shit. That would drive me insane. And people were going to live there? I tried to wrap my mind around being a child growing up inside of domed colonies underwater with around twenty five hours of night every day. I guess it wasn't any different than growing up on a mining colony or some other hellhole.

I heard the footsteps and echoes on her end, meaning she must be leaving whatever area she was in. I was startled when she yawned loudly and nearly made me respond in kind. "So, yeah, have fun with that list I gave you. If I don't hear from you before then be safe on Titan."

"Thanks, mom." Again, it felt good to know someone cared about me in some way, and not out of obligation of being related. But my impulse was still to cover up those feelings with humor and sarcasm.

Anna didn't seem to mind, playing along and getting in her own jabs, "Make sure to eat all of your questionably flavored meals so you can grow up to be a big, strong and handsome marine."

Heading over to the laundry machine I smiled and mumbled back, "Fuck off."

Making a sound of indecision she playfully responded, "Not a bad idea. I'll probably do that too before I get some sleep."

Sighing at her continued innuendo I knew it was a lost cause. She was just bold and I needed to get used to it. Still, the thought of her pleasuring the body she proudly displayed in that holo wasn't exactly something I wanted in the forefront of my mind as I was trying to get some sleep. Now I was going to be fighting off recollections of all the routine, and frankly unsexy, times we showered together in UCMT to give my perverted thoughts more detail. I grumbled to let her know "Didn't need to know that."

"Bye!" Her giggles were cut short as she ended the connection and left me once again realizing she was saying these things specifically

to get a rise out of me.

Taking the earbuds out I stuffed them into a pocket of my MCUs and began unloading my laundry. A second or two in and I noticed the unnerving silence in the room, besides Finch's laundry machine. I could feel Finch watching me, a tingle going up my spine and lodging itself in the base of my skull.

Rolling my shoulders to rid myself of the sensation I went back to unloading my laundry in silence. That is until Finch broke the seal on his curiosity, "That your girlfriend?"

I heaved a sigh of frustration at the question. So he had been listening in and drew the wrong conclusion. I was too tired, physically and mentally, to try and navigate a conversation with Finch to try and correct him. Looking over my shoulder I shook my head and grunted my reply, "No. Friend from UCMT."

Finch stood there with his arms folded and eyebrow raised, not believing a word I said. "Right. Because everyone has friends from UCMT sending them bikini holos. Then again that's what you said about that babe you said was your sister."

"You wouldn't because you don't have any friends or family. No one can stand your ass." Frayed nerves fired off my mouth before I could think. This was almost exactly like his invading my privacy with Lizzy's holo.

But I'd let him get a reaction out of me. Cringing at my mistake I quickly looked back at Finch only to see him murderously glowering back, his nostrils flaring and posture tense. Confused as this was not the way I expected him to react, I quickly tried to apologize, "Shit, I'm sorry, man."

His voice was low and icier than the temperature outside, standing away from the wall with balled fists. The muscles in his neck and forearms twitched with barely restrained fury. "Better watch your fucking mouth, Shepard."

Recognizing that this wasn't some typical stunt from him to prove his street credentials I stood and raised my arms in an attempt to placate him, "I mean it. I shouldn't have said that."

He looked away, nearing an emotional eruption. I warily watched him for any sign he might lash out but when he growled and back off I let go of the breath I had been holding. Risking him attacking me from behind I turned around and resumed removing my laundry.

After emptying the machine I began a quick and haphazard folding only to realize I was missing a sock for my undersuit. Throwing open the door to the machine I checked inside to verify I hadn't left it inside. Finding nothing I stood and leaned against the machine, my fatigue and frustration mixing to make me just as volatile as Finch had been a minute ago. I was standing here the entire time. How the hell does it disappear? Unable to hold it in anymore I kicked the machine furiously and let loose an incoherent string of verbal diarrhea. "This is fucking bullshit! How can a single fucking sock disappear every fucking time? How the fuck does this shit happen to me?"

When Finch looked at me queerly I irritably dismissed his prying with a wave of my hand and a scowl, "I'm missing a sock."

Still in the throes of his own anger he snarled back a reply, making the assumption I was accusing him. "Well I didn't take it."

I cocked my head his direction, my own flaring temper causing my mind to wildly speculate why he was so defensive. My own voice lowered into a drawl, making it clear that while I was telling the truth I now questioned his guilt "And I didn't accuse you of taking it."

Finch didn't back down. "Then shut up the fuck up about it already. No one gives a fuck if you lost a sock."

A haze of rage descended over my tired mind, surging through my fatigued body with renewed energy and clarity. An uncontrollable urge to launch myself fists first at him for this and every other time he's pissed me off. Tensing my body to strike I was suddenly struck by the parallels between this interaction and every confrontation between Finch and Galen. The motivation for violence evaporated, leaving me more aware and clear headed. I had completely fallen for his bullshit and was letting him bait me. If I followed through with this then I was risking everything I had worked hard to achieve since I arrived at MVC. With that new found clarity, I relaxed my posture and stared at him sternly. "I don't know what your problem is but you can quit trying to pick a fight with me. I'm not Galen. I'm not going to fall for your shit."

Sneering at me he picked another angle to chip away at my patience, "That's because you got the spine of a hanar. At least Kemp has the fucking courage to stand up for himself, jellyfish."

Laughing hollowly I mocked him for his pitiful attempt, "Or maybe I recognize you're only doing this to get a reaction."

When he lacked a response I turned my back to him, considering the conversation done. I went back to organizing my laundry, intent on getting out of here as soon as possible, but Finch had other ideas. "Bet those pirates on Mindoir got a good reaction out of you when they killed people, huh?"

My hands froze midaction of folding. The rage I had suppressed with reason and willpower exploded within me. Visions of that day I had buried and repressed came back to the forefront of my mind. My mother's body and the bodies of so many others. The death and destruction. The fear gripping me when I was separated from Ari and believed she had become another casualty. In one swift motion I spun around and closed the distance between us, pinning Finch against the wall. Despite the maelstrom of emotions my voice was calm and threatening as I whispered centimeters from his face. "What did you just say?"

Finch showed more resolve and courage than I gave him credit for. Or at least enough brazen stupidity to realize he was treading on dangerous ground. He shoved me away and stalked forward, daring me to touch him again. "You ain't shit, Shepard. Was that supposed to scare me?"

Just as with Pavlo the overwhelming desire to launch a biotic strike

to his head was begging me to act. But remembering the shitstorm that had followed that calmed me, slightly. Enough to know this situation was spiraling out of control fast. "What the fuck is your problem, Finch? Everyone else in the squad gets along. Even Barrera and Vercesi and they argue all the time about politics."

He grinned widely and tauntingly, viewing my attempts to defuse the altercation as weakness, "I knew it. You're just a scared little rich bitch playing marine."

My rage was now being joined by the built up torment of dealing with his inability to understand the simple fucking concept of teamwork. "Seriously? The squad is supposed to trust each other but you fuck us over every single fucking time. Sometimes I don't even know if you're going cause us to fail or not and wind up spending more time breaking up fights that you start."

He screwed his face up, shrugging off my pleas to end his irritations. "Well we haven't so you and the rest of the whiners can quit fucking worrying about it. Don't try to act like you're some leader. You're just another recruit like me."

Losing control I stepped into his personal space again, this time careful to keep my hands to myself, and chastised him. "No one ever had a problem with you until you opened your mouth, Damian. You brought this all on yourself. We're supposed to be a team. If you spent as much time helping out and being a team player as you did pushing people's haptics then we wouldn't have this problem."

Leaning forward to get in my face he threw my attempts at civility back, "I don't need to get pointers from a spoiled little kiss ass like you. You're just a punk who got lucky on Mindoir and then wound up in the lap of luxury on Bekenstein."

Oh this motherfucker was ticking off all the boxes on things that pissed me off. Matching his reckless taunting I fired back, "And you're just a fucking asshole that wants to play thug in the military because you were too scared to be a real one back home." I saw something in his change face that let me know I had hit my mark. Rather than take that opportunity to try and get him to see reason I let my rage flow and pounced by mocking him. "That's it, isn't? The real thugs back home probably kicked your ass all the time, didn't they? That's why you ran away to join the UNSC?"

The tables successfully turned, Finch went defensive, his own weaknesses out on display. "You don't know shit about me."

"That doesn't stop you from running your mouth off at me about things you don't know. It's not so much fun when someone is picking away at something fucked up in your life, is it?" I smirked seeing Finch's emotional meltdown. The flaring nostrils, the trembling with rage, and the murderous contempt. Seeing that weakness I hammered him more, crossing the line into subjects that I should know better than to broach as I gestured to the tattoos covering his flesh. "What's wrong? Are all of those for show? Trying to make up for the fact mommy and daddy didn't love you? Left you to live on the streets and no one liked you there either?"

But when I saw the tears gathering in the corner of his eyes I

finally realized my mistake. Instantly I recoiled internally at my dig about parents, knowing how my own had died. If he brought that into the fight then I couldn't really say he was being unfair, could I?

Finally losing his internal battle he lunged at me, throwing a wild right haymaker that I easily blocked although part of the momentum carried and his fist connected with my shoulder solidly. I danced out of his reach and tossed him aside, his upper body crashing into the nearby laundry machines as I readied myself for another attack.

He recovered and struck again but this time kept his attack more controlled. His shoulders lowered as he sprung forward, taking me by surprise with a tackle and double leg takedown. My head and upper back slammed onto the cold concrete floor, leaving me dazed and out of breath, but I retained enough wherewithal to bring him off balance by wrapping my arm around his head. With my own head still swimming I locked my arm under his chin and applied a choke, stretching back and wrapping my legs around his torso. Finch fought against the choke, sliding our bodies across the floor as he struggled to turn his head and break my hold. I tightened my grip in response until he stopped fighting back. Once I released him he sat up, gasping for breath only to be met with my right leg blasting into his midsection to get him off me.

I scrambled to my feet and put some distance between us while rubbing the back of my head, bring my fingers into my vision and relieved to find no traces of blood. Finch had recovered again, leaning against a laundry machine trying to catch his breath but he held the distance between us. His chest heaving I could see in his eyes he was reevaluating his course of actions. Maybe some part of his mind was engaging and realized that fighting me was not the greatest idea ever since I beat him every time in hand to hand combat drills now.

Finch and I continued in a standoff, staring each other down and breathing heavily. After a nearly half a minute I was feeling confident that the worst was over so I tried again to appeal to his sanity. "I tried really fucking hard to be fair with you when we first started here. You're just such a fucking asshole all the time. You go out of your way to piss people off and then wonder why they don't like you. That's on you, Damian."

He raged back, rasping the best he could but at least he wasn't trying to swing on me anymore. "Yeah fucking right! You and Galen were already talking shit about me before we got off the transport from Reach! I mentioned I was from Earth and you guys thought I had some easy life in an arcology!"

Feeling guilty for my first impression and remark about his parents I nodded along, deciding he it was better to let him vent his spleen. "Fine. We were wrong. But you chose to strike out at all of us at some point." In a moment of candor, I tried to relate to him how he had touched upon my own dark past. "You don't know what my life has been like either. I never wanted to go to Bekenstein. I hated it there. I don't get really along with my family there. I don't want to go back. I wanted to stay on Mindoir, but pirates and the fucking Hegemony and..."

I caught my babbling before I could mention Lizzy and her selfish decision to sell the family farm. My attempt to reason with him had

turned into my own venting session, airing things I had never voiced to another. Which made it doubly odd that I was doing so with Finch of all people. Sighing to relieve my stress and chuckling mirthlessly at how bizarre this night had turned out, I carried on, more cautious about revealing too much of myself. "They made sure that wasn't an option after they killed my parents. I only survived because me and my sister were not home. We got lucky. Really lucky. So now you know why I am trying so hard to make the most of this career. I'm a biotic. I have no where else to go. And now you know what you're poking every time you try to taunt me about my past."

For once Finch was uncomfortably silent, rubbing his throat and looking anywhere but at me. He finally looked my way and looked like it pained him to say what he said. "Shit. I'm sorry."

Realizing this was the best I could hope to get from him, I acknowledged his apology and swallowed around the lump in my throat brought on by the flux of emotions I had undergone in the past five minutes. "You need to just stop acting like an asshole. We're supposed to be a team."

Finch looked away again, not quite believing me as he mumbled "Maybe you see it that way, but I doubt Kemp and the rest will stop giving me shit."

I could see his perspective on the matter, especially having a bit more insight on him now. Sighing at the predicament I bargained with him. "Look, man, I'll try to work on the rest. We don't have much time left here, but just put in the effort to be less of a dick?"

Still skeptical he shrugged and grumbled, "And what if that doesn't work?"

Becoming exasperated again with his attitude I pointed out the reality of his situation, "So what if it doesn't? That's on them. You can't control what others say or do. You can only control yourself." Seeing that part of my message resonate in Finch when he nodded his head I continued, "I'm not going to ask about your past or whatever, but if you're running away from it like I am, then realize there's always a chance for a new beginning."

This time I got a genuinely positive response from him, a crooked smile and bit of light hearted teasing, "You trying to be all squad leader again, Elvis?"

"Someone told me once that you're not on anyone else's schedule but your own. So if you can't fix the damage done here then you can always make a fresh start in your first unit." I laughed as soon as the words were out of my mouth. Here I was, still not fully believing in what my Abuela had told me myself but passing it along like some sagely wisdom I had picked up in my eighteen years. Still smiling I provided more anecdotal evidence from my own life, "There's a reason Kemp mocks me all the time about being squad leader here. Why you learned about my nickname Elvis. I was just getting by in UCMT and our DI was always picking on me. The First Sergeant there..." Yet again I drifted off as I realized I was being a bit too honest in my tale and quickly edited the personal details of that conversation with a shrug and half truths. "He pointed out that I wasn't living up to my potential. Challenged me to work harder. After talking with

some other people I realized that I had no other choice but to do that if I really wanted to make sure I never had to face going back to Bekenstein. Maybe you use the same motivation for you?"

Finch went silent and stared at the laundry machine currently cleaning and drying his uniforms. After a moment he nodded and replied, his voice still a bit hoarse, "Yeah." Frowning and clearing his throat he repeated himself. "Yeah, maybe you're right."

Satisfied with the progress made, and utterly wiped out from the physical and emotional toll, I went to grab my laundry and leave Finch to think on what had been said here. "Just think about it." As I tossed my gear into my bag I frowned to myself, remembering the missing sock that started this entire event. Sighing in frustration I muttered "Great. Just fucking wonderful. Now I'm down to three pairs of socks."

Finch looked on amused and offered "You could always ask DI Ellison if you could purchase some more."

I looked on horrified, wondering how she would react to that. If she was willing to go berserk over simple things then I had no clue what she would do to me for something like this. She'd probably call it a sign of my lack of attention to detail or inability to maintain equipment. Something crazy. "Are you kidding me? You didn't have a private conversation with her after we got lost on our last land nav."

Finch's amusement became even more apparent as he cheerfully nodded and replied "I know."

Narrowing my eyes it struck me that he was gleeful to see her reaction so long as it was aimed at me. Not to gently reminding him about his promise to be less of an asshole I said "You're doing it again, Finch."

Finch's grin grew wider and he shrugged, clearly enjoying the thought of my impending ass chewing. "That's not being an asshole. Everyone gets a kick out of watching you get chewed out. Think of this is my suggestion to make the rest of the squad happy."

I snorted at his haptic thin attempt to put the squad first. Glaring back at the offending machine that had misplaced my sock, or more likely acted as a dimensional conduit for gremlins, I suddenly felt a lot more kinship with Anna and her missing undersuit tops, grumbling "It's not my fault something is stealing my socks."

* * *

><p>Codex Entry: D77 H-TC Pelican Combat Dropship

A workhorse of the UNSC, the D77 Pelican is an exoatmospheric, vertical takeoff/landing [VTOL], tactical combat support dropship that combines many roles into a single indispensable asset in the UNSC arsenal. Analysis following the [Terran Translation: First Contact War] found that the UNSC was not as prepared as previously thought to deal with rapid interstellar deployment, orbital combat insertion, and remote battlefield management. Experts pointed towards the glut of specialized vehicles and assets needed to be transported

by UNSC vessels for orbital, atmospheric, and terrestrial dominance. Another criticism was an over reliance upon Special Warfare [SpecWar] troops dropped in Single Occupant Exoatmospheric Insertion Vehicle [SOEIV] for securing landing zones for larger conventional forces. The response was the UNSC Joint Rapid Mobilization Enhancement Program [JRMEP], a comprehensive redesign of vehicles, weapons, tactics, and strategy.

Developed and assembled by Misriah Armory's Combined Orbital Sciences Interoperability Division [COSID] in [Terran Translation: 2501 CE, Terran Calendar], the D77 Dropship was an early winner in JRMEP and helped to shape the direction of the program. The dropship fused together the services and roles of several different vehicles to create a single stage surface to orbit transport platform for light and mechanized infantry with additional battle management capability. Since it's inception it has served as a versatile vehicle in peace keeping, patrols, and combat operations for the UNSC and law enforcement agencies.

The vehicle is a heavily armored combat platform with a relatively low profile and impressive carrying capacity. A coating of heat deflective and radar absorbent materials cover a dual layer of Titanium-A plating. The forward seated pilot's compartment houses two tandem work stations for a pilot and copilot/mission specialist. The third crew member, a crew chief, is seated in the main compartment to the rear and helps to work the weapons suites. The main compartment, commonly referred to as the 'blood tray', has modular configurations, but the primary configuration is to seat 20 human infantry and 2 stowed M274 Mongoose Ultra Light All Terrain Vehicles. A powerful magnetic clamp and mass effect field assembly is housed into the ventral surface of the tail assembly which allows the D77 to ferry impressive cargo loads during orbital transit. A limited life support system keeps conditions tolerable at full occupation capacity. The crew and occupants are expected to wear protective exoatmospheric gear at all times during operations.

The considerable propulsion and lift capabilities are achieved through a combination of mass effect fields, powerful articulating ion thrusters, and a lifting body design. A Class II Viracocha element zero drive core and Marici V2 micro fusion reactor provide the primary power and mass effect fields. The [6] forward assist vectored plasma thrusters are housed within the articulated nacelles in the primary forward and aft wings. [8] vertical and maneuvering vectored thrusters are distributed on the ventral surfaces of the wing nacelles and fuselage. Emergency maneuvering thrust is produced by [8] strategically placed Helios chemical thruster propulsion nozzles. The D77 lacks a translight engine and thus is incapable of FTL travel and must rely upon transport for interstellar and even long duration interplanetary travel.

As with all assets created since the advent of JRMEP, the D77's operations package is provided by the Virtual Intelligence Sapient Sensory Synergy Suite [VIS4] created by Hahne Kedar Defense [HKD]. All operations are undertaken with aid of the Multispectral Integrated Sensory Operations [MISO] workstations which uses VIS4 assets to create a Real Time Combat Sensory Immersion [RTCSI] for the pilots and crew chief. Additional services provided by VIS4 include the Navigational Assistance Virtual Intelligence [NAVI], Tactical Insertion/Extraction Situational Awareness System [TIESAS], Target Acquisition/Counter Measures Package [TACMP], Robotic Platform

Command Virtual Intelligence [RPCVI], and the Battle Network Support Virtual Intelligence [BNSVI]. This full spectrum package allows the D77 and it's crew to be flexible in their role as air transport and support for ground forces. Additional sensory input and network extension can be obtained by deploying the single [1] Field Interoperability Reconnaissance Surveillance Telemetry [FIRST] drone.

The offensive and defensive packages allows the Pelican to function in roles as a close air support gunship, local drone coordination controller, and combat transport. Standard issue are [2] chin mounted, twin linked M370 Mass Accelerator Autocannons, [2] M410 Dual Mass Accelerator Heavy Machine Guns flank mounted to either side of the fuselage, [4] M539 Moray Orbital Denial Self Guiding Space Mine [ODSGSM] located in ventral bays, and a [1] M247 Heavy Machine Gun ceiling mounted in the main compartment that can be manually operated by the crew chief. Each main wing has [2] hardpoints, for a total of [4], for mounting optional weapons packages which include: M8C Utu G/GNC Directed Energy Weapon; Anvil Air to Surface Anti Armor missile pod; Inferno Air to Surface Precision Kill Anti Personnel missile pod; Argent Air to Air Anti Aircraft missile pod; Medusa Vessel to Vessel Vacuum missile pod; and Tyrian Disruptor missile pod. The TIESAS and TACMP helps to automate defensive countermeasures which includes: a Class III Kinetic Barrier Generation System; [4] Class IV GARDIAN laser turrets mounted in pairs on the ventral and dorsal surfaces of the fuselage; [2] Crosette Deployable Electronic Warfare Support [DEWS] pods affixed to the main wings; and [2] RP36 Valkyrie Micro Hunter Killer Interceptor [MHKI] drones.

* * *

><p>Codex Entry: FSD Stalwart Class Solar Defense Light Frigate

The Stalwart Class Light Frigate is the backbone of the UNSC Air Force and figures heavily into their strategic defense of inhabited human star systems. With a hull classification of FSD for Frigate, Solar Defense, each UNSC Air Force Light Fleet employs [24] FSD Stalwarts spread across [6] groups in the role of light skirmish, interdiction and patrol platforms, emergency response delivery systems, and atmospheric capable warships.

A product of Joint Rapid Mobilization Enhancement Program [JRMEP] and the ongoing Project BRAVADO, the Stalwart class was introduced in [Terran Translation: 2528 CE, Terran Calendar] to replace the aging Sentinel class light frigates. Applying lessons from past experiences, the Office of Naval Intelligence [ONI] collaborated with several major defense contractors to create a superior light frigate that could perform in multiple roles for solar defense.

Angular and aerodynamic in design for quick transition between atmospheric, orbital, and vacuum operations, the Stalwart class light frigate is an abnormally lightweight warship. This is mostly owed to it's thin Titanium-A armor coated in a heavy heat ablative layer. Twin Class IV Bishamonten fusion reactors and a Brontes power storage and distribution array provide the primary energy generation and grid. The propulsion and FTL system consists of a Varuna Class III element zero drive core, Khonsu Class III Translight Engine, and [4] Apollo antiproton thrusters. Vertical, maneuvering, and emergency thrust is provided by [12] vectored ion thrusters and [8]

hydrogen-oxygen thrusters. A Stalwart class light frigate is capable of FTL travel with a top self powered speed of roughly [Terran Translation: 14 Terran LY per Terran day], and subluminal top safe speed of [Terran Translation: 45% c; 135, 000 km per Terran second].

As a solar defense frigate the Stalwart class is expected to patrol and engage threats across diverse settings in a solar system it has been outfitted to excel in multiple environments. A crew of [76] live in shared quarters and operates the vessel in shifts of [24] spread across: Vessel Operations Center [VOC]; Combat Information Center [CIC]; Engineering/Maintenance Center [EMC]; Briefing Conference Room [BCR]; [4] hangar bays; and [1] cargo bay. Additional personnel aboard include [1] UNSC Army light infantry platoon [48], [1] UNSC Air Force security platoon [48], and [1] UNSC Air Force vessel support flight [14]. The entire warship uses the Virtual Intelligence Sapiient Sensory Synergy Suite [VIS4] for all activities and operations, including Real Time Combat Sensory Immersion [RTCSI] workstations using Multispectral Integrated Sensory Operations [MISO] technology. The Stalwart's VIS4 package includes: Navigational Assistance Virtual Intelligence [NAVI]; Slipstream Astrogation Virtual Intelligence [SAVI]; Target Acquisition/Countermeasures Virtual Intelligence [TACVI]; Battle Network Support Virtual Intelligence [BNSVI]; Battle Network Regional Hub Package [BNRHP]; Vacuum Active/Passive Sensor Array [VAPSA]; Robotic Platform Command Virtual Intelligence [RPCVI]; Celestial Surface/Meteorological Scan Package [CSMSP]; Vessel Integrated Electronic Warfare System [VIEWS]; and Battlespace Joint Operations Mission Control Package [BJOMCP].

To better fulfill it's multiple duties and make use of it's limited space the Stalwart class carries a diverse complement of vehicles and drones. A UNSC Air Force vessel support flight assigned to each Stalwart frigate consists of: [2] F41 Broadsword A/X Multirole Strike Fighters; [2] F61 Trident Vacuum Attack Fighters; [4] D47 Kodiak A/X Shuttles; [2] D77 Pelican Combat Dropships; and [8] RP99 Wombat A/X Drone Fighters. To support the UNSC Army element aboard, the D77 Pelicans can be used to ferry the infantry platoon and their vehicles to a terrestrial surface as emergency responders. Those vehicles consist of: [1] M12 Warthog Force Application Vehicle; [1] M35 Mako Hostile Environment Infantry Vehicle; and [4] M274 Mongoose Ultra Light All Terrain Vehicles. Assistance with engineering and cargo management is handled by: [4] M525 Atlas power loader exoskeletons; [2] Mk III B Cyclops engineering variant exoskeletons; and [12] RP148 DVERGR maintenance drones. Communications, sensory, and surveillance assets include: [4] RP386 Stealth Tactical Aerospace Reconnaissance Satellites [STARS] comm drones; [20] RP201 HUGINN vacuum telemetry micro drone; [10] RP202 MUNINN atmospheric telemetry micro drone; and [20] RP242 HERMOD expendable reconnaissance probe drones.

Given the light armor of a Stalwart, it's focus is geared towards a great deal of offensive strength but this by no means leaves the Stalwart defenseless. In addition to excellent propulsion and avoidance capabilities, the warship's defensive capacity is further augmented by: [1] Class IV Kinetic Barrier Generation System; [24] Class V GARDIAN laser turrets; and [4] Crosette Deployable Electronic Warfare Support [DEWS] hull integrated launch pods. Reinforcing it's role as an effective weapons platform despite it's small stature, the offensive arsenal includes: [1] Mark II Light Spinal Mass Accelerator Cannon System [LS-MACS]; [4] Javelin Vacuum to Vacuum Disruptor

Torpedo [VVDT] hull integrated forward launch bays; [4] M870 Rampart Mass Accelerator Autocannons mounted in pairs on either side of the hull; [16] Archer Vacuum to Vacuum Missile [VVDM] hull integrated launch pods; [4] Anvil Air to Surface Disruptor Missile [ASDM] hull integrated launch pods; [4] Tyrian Air to Air Disruptor Missile [AADM] hull integrated launch pods; [2] Moray Orbital Denial Self Guided Mine [ODSGM] hull integrated launch pods; [20] RP46 SKOLL Hunter/Killer Micro Drones [HKMD]; [12] Class IV Sopdu Dark Energy Enhanced Fission Space Mine [DEEFMS]; and [2] Class II Shiva Dark Energy Enhanced Fission Delivery System [DEEFDS].

* * *

><p>Codex Entry: Human Insurrection

It is no secret to the greater galactic community that humans are a young and often immature race. This observation and criticism is exemplified in the reoccurring spates of political unrest and outright rebellion informally referred to collectively as the 'Insurrection'.

The human advent of slipspace and mass effect physics in [Terran Translation: 2296 CE, Terran Calendar] marked the beginning of their exploration in earnest. Establishment of interstellar colonies and outposts for resource extraction were a welcome opportunity to address the underlying issues of the Interplanetary War still plaguing Earth. Namely, overpopulation, resource strain, pollution, climate change, and the new reality of decimated cities and infrastructures in the wake of the the conflict. The deep schisms present in modern human politics and society emerged during this era along cultural fault lines that pitted the majority of humans residing within the Sol System against those who lived on nascent colonies and remote resource extraction outposts.

This discord was fostered by a growing concern among colonists of an unfair advantage in Systems Alliance representation that favored the larger populations and multiple nations of Earth. Coinciding with this was the UNSC's rapid growth in order to defend human colonization. These combined events created an atmosphere of totalitarian fears of an unchecked and exploitative Systems Alliance that no longer cared for colonist concerns and an expanding military force with no visible threats but it's own citizens.

These accusations were not without countering concerns from Earth and Sol. Politics on Earth began circulating complaints that the Systems Alliance and UNSC colonization expenditures were rife with excess and corruption, granting new and cutting edge infrastructure projects to colonies while aging systems in Sol crumbled. The increased tax burden shouldered by Earth that sunk trillions of credits into colonization only further colored the perception of colonists as spoiled and petulant children.

The clashing opinions gave rise to regional actions in the form of unionization efforts, work stoppages, and protests by groups such as the Sol Heritage Association [SHA], Secessionist Union [SU], Freedom and Liberation Party [FLP], and the People's Occupation [PO]. Negotiations overseen by the Colonial Administration Authority [CAA] between colonists and colonial investment groups attempted to address concerns, audit expenditures, and quell disquiet. An unforeseen consequence in the negotiation process was increased collaboration

and coordination in civil disobedience. Even more troubling were rumblings on Arcturus from the Ministry of Intelligence and Investigations [MI2] and Office of Naval Intelligence [ONI] that the ranks of the CAA had been infiltrated by radical colonial advocates.

In the light of the allegations, Systems Alliance Prime Minister Nigella Iwadare ordered a cessation to the negotiations in [Terran Translation: 2442 CE, Terran Calendar] to begin a thorough investigation of the CAA. This move was decried on both sides of the issue as it rendered years of negotiations null and void, leaving the protests to begin anew the same year. This time the civil disobedience was joined with an unprecedented attack by separatist forces on a UNSC Marine base on the colony of Arcadia known as the Far Isle Rebellion.

In response to the violence on Arcadia, riots and rebellions became commonplace across Systems Alliance space. The Systems Alliance responded with authorizing an aggressive UNSC policy of preemptively and quietly dealing with the burgeoning threats. The First Insurrection War would officially begin in [Terran Translation: 2444 CE, Terran Calendar] when UNSC naval forces blockading the Fucanglong system in the Paramahansa Sea star cluster were ambushed by insurrectionists.

The reaction by the Systems Alliance and UNSC was to target irritant organizations with a variety of criminal charges and military strikes. This prompted further radicalization as insurrection groups splintered in separate factions that ran the gamut of organized political movements, violent rebel militias and paramilitary insurgent forces. This best exemplified in the FLP, which split into several factions, one of which eventually spawned the United Rebel Front [URF] on Terra Nova and another which formed deep ties with the Terra Firma political movement on Shanxi.

A costly blunder which further destabilized the Systems Alliance response early in the war was to allow public hysteria to propel the CAA investigations into a politically motivated hunt for insurrection sympathizers. A massive purge of personnel in government and military positions commenced over spurious accusations of loose affiliation and ties to the insurrection. Disgruntled, furious, and courted by the insurrection, those targeted held a wealth of knowledge and expertise that was put to use and undoubtedly extended the length of the conflict.

The insurrection would continue to be a dangerous security and social issue in Systems Alliance space for over thirty [Terran] years as it alternated between periods of relative peace and outbreaks of terrorist attacks, violent riots, and regional rebellions. Notable in this time are the detonation of a fissile device in the Haven Arcology; Bombing of the civilian cruise vessel National Holiday in orbit above Reach; and extended military actions to put down rebellions on Harvest, Terra Nova, Shanxi, Benning, and various remote resource extraction locations.

This conflict would come to an unofficial ceasefire with the beginning of the [Terran Translation: First Contact War] after an errant turian naval patrol illegally occupied the human colony world of Shanxi and blockaded the Que Qiao star system in [Terran Translation: 2479 CE, Terran Calendar]. FLP and Terra Firma militias

would gain notoriety and respect for the insurrection movement with their heroics during the occupation. With humanity signing a peace treaty to cease hostilities and entering into negotiations to discuss reparations and possible entrance into the Citadel Charter in [Terran Translation: 2484 CE, Terran Calendar], insurrectionist forces capitalized upon the greater goodwill of the public and divided attention of the Systems Alliance to quietly blend back into the human populations.

While humanity as a whole slowly welcomed the idea of coexistence and open exchange with alien civilizations, the natural distrust of institutions inherent in insurrection communities made for the perfect breeding grounds of xeno bigotry and human ethnocentrism. This view was reinforced by the Skyllian Onslaught, a series of border disputes and skirmishes between the Systems Alliance and Batarian Hegemony ranging from [Terran Translation: 2499 CE to 2507 CE, Terran Calendar]. While the UNSC proved more than up to the task of repelling the Hegemony forces, the topic of alien military aggression reawakened foul memories of the [Terran Translation: First Contact War] in the public.

New waves of human colonization, accompanying expansion of the UNSC, continued dissatisfaction with the Systems Alliance, thriving human jingoism, and growing xenophobia created echoes of the conditions leading up to the First Insurrection War. These conditions would prove combustible when in [Terran Translation: 2536 CE, Terran Calendar] human terrorist Ivor Johnstagg was killed in a failed attempt to murder the Volus Ambassador outside of the Presidium Embassies on the Citadel. Johnstagg, a native of Terra Nova and member of URF forces, was believed to be acting independently in retribution for the Madrigal SPECTRE Massacre of [Terran Translation: 2533 CE, Terran Calendar]. Under intense scrutiny with the attention of the galaxy upon them, the Systems Alliance response was to authorize military action against URF operations on Terra Nova. The result was a disastrous ground war and occupation beginning in [Terran Translation: 2537 CE, Terran Standard] which marked the beginning of the Second Insurrection War.

In this second war insurrectionist forces showed more strategic and logistical capabilities. This was largely owed to the dramatic increase of military and intelligence veterans joining the ranks of insurrectionist forces. Access to the Terminus black market and smuggling operations also played a particularly key role. Most noteworthy was the presence of insurrectionist naval forces, made of refurbished military vessels from the Terminus or converting decommissioned UNSC vessels back into combat capacity. This prevalence of illegal weapons technology, experienced military personnel, and the emergence of new insurrectionist groups would cause problems as large organized rebellions like that on Terra Nova erupted on Harvest, Benning, Arcadia, Eden Prime, and Elysium.

The one bright spot for the Systems Alliance and UNSC was the emergence of competition and infighting between insurrectionist forces. The introduction of Terminus influence further splintered groups between die hard ideological purists who refused to work with xenos and more pragmatic factions which saw only means to an end. One prominent group introduced was Totenkopf, an anti colonial offshoot of PO which used bioweapon attacks on several human worlds and space stations, including the release of a microbial agent on Gagarin Station in [Terran Translation: 2547 CE, Terran Calendar], Luna in

[Terran Translation: 2549 CE, Terran Calendar], and Arcturus Station in [Terran Translation: 2554 CE, Terran Calendar]. Another was Cerberus, an apparent outgrowth of URF responsible for a series of raids on private facilities for controlled materials.

Yet again xeno interference would mark the official end of the war, this time in the Covenant assault on the human colony world of Harvest in [Terran Translation: 2556 CE, Terran Calendar]. And just as FLP aided greatly in the defense of Shanxi, so too did SU and URF forces present on Harvest. The great divergence from the resolution of the First Insurrection War is that insurrectionist forces outside of Harvest failed to cease in their aggressions nor blended back into human populations following the end of the war. Instead, insurrectionists and secessionist sympathizer populations across Systems Alliance space began an informal exodus into the Terminus to found independent colonies. An estimated [8,000,000] humans left Systems Alliance space in the [6] [Terran] year period of [Terran Translation: 2559 CE, Terran Calendar] and [Terran Translation: 2565 CE, Terran Calendar].

Adding to the intrigue and complexity of the Terminus, human insurrectionist forces have adapted well into the various lifestyles. The formal colonizations of Anhur, Arvuna, and Horizon have shown how elements of the SU and PO can govern a thriving colony of millions successfully with the aid of corporate partnership. Elsewhere, insurrectionists have opted to use strong arm tactics favored by Terminus warlords to forcefully gain control of Venezia, Trident, and Zorya. More common are the scores of small, independent subsistence colonies and operations that scratch out a living among the piracy and warlords of the Terminus.

The biggest concern in the last [10] [Terran] years has been insurrectionists forming a loose alliance to protect human colonies and interests. The New Colonial Alliance [NCA] is, by all appearances, a non binding agreement between human colonies in the Terminus that promotes free trade and mutual defense. Formed by a pact of non aggression between URF, FLP, and SU, the NCA has slowly emerged as a unified front in aiding smuggling and insurrectionist activities in Systems Alliance space. Intelligence analysts across Citadel space warn of troubling signs the NCA is formalizing an independent organized human military force to intimidate mercenary and pirate factions. Even more troubling is that a majority of the ideological views held by insurrectionists are being laid aside as they form treaties and inroads with terminus power players.

With the growing popularity of the Terra Firma party in the Systems Alliance parliament and general prosperity of the Terminus colonies, odds are high that the UNSC has not fought it's last battle against insurrectionists.

* * *

><p>Codex Entry: M392 Saber Designated Marksman Rifle

The M392 Saber Designated Marksman Rifle [DMR] is an effective hybrid weapon that incorporates the accuracy and power of long range sniper weapons with a more lightweight and modest body. The precursor M127 DMR created by Nanchang Arms was used extensively by the UNSC in the confined terrain of urban battlefields and megastructures during the

First Insurrection War and [Terran Translation: First Contact War]. Having become a fixture in terrestrial combat strategy, the UNSC commissioned an updated model and awarded the contract to Misirah Armory to begin production in [Terran Translation: 2518 CE, Terran Calendar].

Following in the mold of similar micro scale mass accelerators that function as a marksman weapon, the M392 was designed to be a flexible and light weight semiautomatic weapon that could be used by UNSC forces in close quarters and midrange engagements. The differences from there become pronounced as the Saber is designed from the outset to be tailored to each individual certified marksman. While this makes the weapon more expensive than others in the UNSC arsenal available for similar tasks, the efficiency and productivity of a Saber in the hands of a trained individual is almost unparalleled.

The goal of the UNSC was to have a standard infantry weapon with superior range and accuracy without the restrictions of a sniper weapon platform in regards to size, weight, and effective rate of fire. The end result was a semiautomatic marksman rifle of average weight and length that fired a larger than average shaving at high velocities. The rails lack the length of traditional sniper rifles so the weapon must produce more potent magnetic fields which in turn create more recoil and heat. As the weapon also lacks the size and weight of traditional sniper rifles, space for recoil and heat management are limited. To compensate for this, Misriah engineers created a unique electronics suite for the Saber which features an Enhanced Visual Optics Suite [EVOS]. The EVOS activates when engaging targets at range and aids the user by making slight corrections in the internal mass effect fields holding the shaving for accuracy. Since the weapon must also be balanced to provide quick semiautomatic fire in close quarters, the heat management allows for a quicker than expected rate of fire in a marksman weapon equal to [14] consecutive shots before overheat. Unfortunately, the EVOS internal mechanisms do not perform as well under the increased heat of consecutive firing so effective rate of fire for accurately engaging targets at range is greatly reduced.

All models feature a black polymer coating with dark gray ceramic accents for ruggedness, insulation, and grip. A major deficiency to the Saber is the limited modular capacity due to the finely tuned and personalized nature of the weapon. The electronics suite is house across the entire dorsal surface and due to the nature of EVOS prevents the attachment and integration of additional VI sensory or targeting systems. Weapon and target status can be linked and displayed via the HUD in armor and headgear suites. The weapon can produce an unobtrusive tactical holographic display just above the electronics suite showing simple readouts. The weapon does not produce holographic pop up sights but instead has an optional modular optical scope known as the Enhanced Visual Optics Suite Display [EVOS-D] which can be can be attached to the dorsal surface. An additional integral targeting module housed within the dorsal electronics suite produces a sighting laser that can be linked to networked weapon systems for laser designator guidance. As the entire firing mechanism is linked to EVOS as well, it greatly restricts the type of internal modular enhancement available as well. The weapon does possess a ventral rail for modular attachments such as a M301 munitions launcher or M788 omni-weapon field fabrication suite.

Aside from the price and limited modular capacity, the single greatest criticism of the M392 is in it's flexibility as a highly effective hybrid weapon where it excels at many tasks but masters none. The larger than average slugs do not quite pack enough mass nor velocity to effectively punch through kinetic barriers the same way as those fired from sniper rifles can. This also is readily apparent in it's lack of armor penetration and inability to function as an anti materiel weapon. The rate of fire, stopping power, and overheat rate make it a poor choice incapable of sustained operations in close quarters. This necessitates that the UNSC Army and Marines order a designated marksman carrying the M392 also carry an M7 Hurricane Submachine Gun, M6E Eagle Automatic Pistol, or M45 Crusader Tactical Shotgun for superior close quarters capability.

* * *

><p>Codex Entry: Terra Firma

Terra Firma is a controversial human political faction with growing representation in the Systems Alliance. The party is a coalition of various regional groups espousing populist policies with heavy emphasis on nativist and human supremacist leanings. In a surprise showing under current party leader Inez Simmons during the [Terran Translation: 2570 CE, Terran Standard] Alliance House of Arcturus elections, Terra Firma now holds the third most seats behind the traditional powerhouses Alliance Socialist Union [ASU] and Interstellar Democratic Party [IDP]. Terra Firma holds it's annual convention every [Terran Translation: 21 February, Terran Standard] on Shanxi as a protest of the Armistice Day between Systems Alliance and Citadel Council forces.

The faction has it's roots in the original Terra Firma political movement lead by famed local union leader Josefina Yapchulay on Shanxi in the waning days of the First Insurrection War. A fringe group with no political representation, it built it's base from local support in the colony's capital and most populated region, Taiyuan Xin. A vocal opponent of Arcturus policies in handling colonies and remote territories, Terra Firma straddled the line between secessionist rhetoric and outright support for insurrectionist movements. Josefina and several of her associates in the Shanxi public unions were the subject of a [Terran Translation: 2467 CE, Terran Standard] Ministry of Intelligence and Investigations [MI2] probe into the funding of the Freedom and Liberation Party terrorist group. Charges were later dropped against Josefina and Terra Firma leadership, but a link was established between low level organizers within the organization and FLP forces known to operate on Shanxi.

When the [Terran Translation: First Contact War] erupted on Shanxi with the unauthorized [Terran Translation: 9 day, Terran Standard] attack and occupation of the colony world, Terra Firma gained the appreciation of the Systems Alliance and UNSC by using their existing infrastructure and partnership with insurrectionist militias to help organize resistance against the turian forces and aid for their fellow humans during the siege. Their efforts were so effective that Josefina was targeted and killed by a turian orbital bombardment aimed at decapitating Terra Firma operational capabilities. Upon the loss of Terra Firma's organization and the mounting casualties, UNSC Army General Lamar Williams ordered a terrestrial surrender to avoid

further losses. This act enraged the Terra Firma and FLP fighters, who refused the order and continued to fight until relieved by UNSC troops during the retaking of Shanxi.

Despite concerns about the blatant ties with insurrectionist groups, Terra Firma parlayed their heroic status in the wake of the Siege of Shanxi and [Terran Translation: First Contact War] into interstellar recognition as heroes of humanity and outsiders to Arcturus politics. Onofre Tubongbanua, the nephew and perceived political heir to Yapchulay as well as a veteran of the First Contact War, was instrumental in capitalizing upon this to carry on his deceased aunt's legacy. In the first elections following the armistice between the Systems Alliance and Citadel Council, Terra Firma showed an impressive inaugural success with twelve district seats in the House of Arcturus. Those twelve representatives, including Tubongbanua, would enter into alliance with the more conservative and right wing IDP. The relationship soured when IDP appropriated a diluted version of the Terra Firma message into their party platform. As a direct result, support and voters for Terra Firma waned dramatically in ensuing elections as the more mainstream and scandal free IDP provided a palatable alternative.

Terra Firma would again come to interstellar recognition in Systems Alliance space during the Second Insurrection War. Yet again providing a borderline seditious voice against Arcturus politics, this time around the faction added a dangerous xenophobic and jingoistic message earning them the label of a hate group by several Citadel space public advocacy organizations. Rather than shy away from this designation, the party has instead embraced the role as provocateur in Systems Alliance politics. While this strategy produced few tangible results in elections, it did increase the media exposure for Tubongbanua and his successors.

This move was widely criticized and mocked for the duration of the Second Insurrection War and Harvest Campaign as further marginalizing Terra Firma into roles as xenophobes and insurrectionist sympathizers. Critics proclaimed the Terra Firma movement dead in the aftermath of the exodus of secessionist humans from Systems Alliance space following the conclusion of the Harvest Campaign. With their negligible voting base decimated this laid the groundwork for what is seen as a takeover of the party by younger ideologues wishing to put forth a more moderate stance.

The modern Terra Firma party is lead by Inez Simmons, representative from Elysium's 7th district, who has helped forge gainful political relationships with IDP and the human business community. The party once again enters into coalition with IDP but political experts now see the roles reversed. Terra Firma is chipping away at the traditional IDP voting base with a hybrid of populist regional interests, human protectionism, Systems Alliance isolation, aggressive military posture, xenophobia, and pressure to support insurrectionist colonies in the Terminus. It's strength is seen in reconciling the current shift towards being in favor of a strong Systems Alliance independent of the Citadel Council with the radical past of being insurrectionist sympathizers. It also sees growing support from human business elite and investors who appreciate the current appeal towards protectionism and opening trade relations with insurrectionist colonies. A curious hot haptic policy over the [Terran] years has been to vilify human biotics. Many see this as a calculated move aimed at appeasing the xenophobic voting base without

sacrificing political power by angering corporate sponsors who have strong ties to xeno markets.

14. And Some Of Those Mistakes Are Titanic

****AN:** The conclusion of his initial training. I appreciate those of you still hanging there while I've gone through this arduous process. More action and adventure are coming up.**

* * *

><p>Saturn Orbit, Saturn, Sol System, Local Interstellar Cluster; December 3rd, 2572 [Standardized Terran Calendar] 0414 [Standardized Terran Time]

The blue glow of a deck of holo cards being used by a group of my fellow recruits held my stupefied and blurry vision. Breaking the hypnotic hold I looked away and yawned before groggily rubbing my tired eyes the best I could with my armored gauntlet covered hands. Unlike some of my fellow recruits I'd yet to get any sleep since we'd left Earth late last night to board a dropship bound for a frigate in orbit. We were about to undertake our final eval to graduate MVC and my stomach was a mess, tying itself in knots as I tried to block out the doubts and fears persistently sprouting in the dark corners of my mind.

It certainly didn't help that the cramped docking bay we were loaded upon wasn't exactly traveling in the lap of luxury. Hell, I'd take the tiny but comfortable sleeping compartments of a civilian transport to being stretched out across the cold and unyielding deck of this frigate in my A/X MCU and combat armor. But I suppose that was part of the training. Preparing us for the harsh reality of real world conditions. As light infantry in the UNSC, we'd be ferried around solar systems and beyond to perform our duty. And it's not like they didn't push us to exhaustion during that final two week field exercise in UCMT.

But this was different. Instead of the cold and miserable but still tolerable northern mountains of Reach we had taken the four and a half hour trip to be in orbit above the massive gas giant Saturn and headed towards it's moon, the methane wonderland of Titan.

For what seemed like the millionth time since a few hours before we left last night I brought up the public records on the planet. Observing the display on my omnitool I tried, in vain, to find something of value there. A detail I'd missed. We'd been briefed early during our trip aboard the frigate as to the overview of our mission. Lay siege to a facility on the surface of the planet. Eliminate hostile forces and gain control of the facility. Then move to the landing zone for an extraction.

Nothing in the public records gave me the slightest clue on how to achieve that. Titan was considered a forgotten world in our own backyard. During the colonization efforts before and after the Interplanetary War Titan had been considered as having potential but the revelations of Mars and Charon had nixed that.

"_The Red Cliffs is now docked with Charles Upham orbital station."_ The ship's VI announcement roused the platoon. I shut off my omnitool

and grabbed my weapons, sliding them into place along the magnetic strips on the back and thigh plates of my armor. Rising to my feet I stretched out all the kinks and knots in my body.

Galen strolled by and punched me in the the midsection, causing me to flinch away from the contact mid yawn. I glared at him and he chuckled and continued on his path to the elevator. "On your feet, Elvis."

Still glaring at his back I fired back "I'm going to find a way to kill you down there, Kemp."

He spun on his heel and walked backwards, carrying on our conversation "I'm terrified, Shepard. That mean you might have to actually do something resembling work during this eval."

So focused on getting in the last word he failed to recognize that he'd reached the rest of the platoon waiting for the elevator. I bit my tongue, tilted my head and folded my arms, watching him literally walk into his blunder.

He stumbled backwards into the crowd, grabbing on others to hold himself up. The disgruntled exclamations and shoving that welcomed him pushed him away from the crowd and he tried to regain his balance for naught.

Not even bothering to mask my laughter I walked forward and offered my hand "On your feet, Duct Rat."

Pushing himself up from the face down position he lay in, he eyed me warily before cracking a grin and reaching for my outstretched hand.

Shih glared at Galen and shook her head at his antics. "That's the second time you've grabbed my ass, Kemp."

He looked at her perplexed and then eyed the body part in question. Abashed he shrugged and explained "It's not like I'm doing it on purpose, Lifan. It's an accident, I swear."

She didn't look the slightest bit convinced, making a sound of disgust in her throat and looking away. Galen turned to me and tried to plead his case. "Seriously. I'm not doing this on purpose."

I stared back unmoved, mockingly nodding along. "Right. You do realize I've yet to forgive you for grabbing my ass during our first microgravity training?"

His jaw dropped and he looked at me in shock. Enjoying his humiliation I slapped him on the shoulder and followed the crowd into the elevator. "It's fine. We understand. You just can't help yourself."

Rushing to catch up he pushed his way into the elevator. He glared at Shih and myself, raising his hands to show they were nowhere near our posteriors.

Shih remained unconvinced and growled "Keep it that way."

We rode the elevator in cramped silence and exited on the third deck.

Moving down the main corridor we reached the primary airlock for this deck. Waiting for us was Commander Thune and DI Ellison.

Coming to a halt in front of the pair we waited for the rest of our platoon, giving me the time to study the contrast in the women. Commander Thune was relatively short and stocky with a pale complexion and copper colored hair wrapped in a neat bun gathered at the back of her head. The blue, grey and gold pattern of her neatly pressed and immaculate officer's dress uniform set a stark contrast to the two rows of colorful ribbons across her left breast. She looked every bit the part of a UNSC officer commanding a warship.

But if Commander Thune had a polished and commanding presence that fit her title, DI Ellison's appearance was just as suited to her occupation. Tall, lean, tanned and scarred. Her golden colored hair was straight and cut short, falling just below her ears. Everything about her was a statement on her career as a soldier in service of the human race. Her armor was clean but well worn in with scratches in the faded paint. She held herself like a woman bored in her surroundings, but her lithe and muscular frame was coiled to pounce at a moment's notice. On her right hip was a standard issue UNSC M6 sidearm and on her back was a tandem pair of M5 assault rifle and M45 shotgun.

Commander Thune was taking the opportunity to observe us as well. Hands behind her back she was giving each and every one of us a critical once over. When it was my turn she examined me from head to toe. I forced myself not to shy away when our eyes met. She stared me down, looking for something, and then moved on to Galen.

I deflated and released a breath I had been holding. This lack of sleep and being nervous about the eval was making me tense. I needed to get my head in the game so I could finish this training and be done with MVC.

"_Docking protocols finalized. Transfer of personnel can commence."_ The ship's VI announced to it's captain.

"Thank you, Grazyna." Commander Thune regarded us one final time before bidding us all farewell from her ship. "You've conducted yourselves in a manner worthy of the uniforms you wear while aboard my ship. Normally there is at least one instance during these training exercises when the recruits do something stupid or dangerous but you've been a well behaved bunch. Speaks well about your leadership." She gave DI Ellison a respectful nod and parted with a final bit of advice. "I've been down there plenty of times for all sorts of evals and testing. Titan's not a fun place, but never forget this is your job now. Find a bit of pride in it. Have some fun with it."

Turning to DI Ellison she wistfully remarked "Oh what I wouldn't give to just stay in orbit above this planet and launch several MAC rounds onto targets instead of doing a patrol of the Oort Cloud." Sighing she seemed to brighten up "Well, I can always follow my own advice. There's plenty of objects out there we can tag with the GARDIANS."

Although her remarks seemed innocent enough, I was instantly reminded of my squadmate, Brad, in UCMT and his obsession with firing the

weapons systems on UNSC warships. Were all the people in the Navy and Air Force lunatics in charge of weapons that could cause horrific damage?

"Always looking to the positives, ma'am." DI Ellison nodded at the Commander and then saluted "Much appreciated for the training these past few weeks and the ride, ma'am."

Commander Thune returned the salute and beamed "Pleasure was mine, sergeant." After dropping the salute she made to walk away but paused and looked over her shoulder at the platoon with a grin "Give 'em hell, Bravos. Shoot something for me, okay?"

The entire platoon, minus myself, roared in answer and followed DI Ellison through the airlock and into the umbilical connecting the frigate to the station. As we walked along it I began to really worry about the kind of people the UNSC put in charge of MACs. Maybe Anna had been right? We shouldn't even trust these people with a mop.

On the other side we were treated to a giant decontamination room large enough for the platoon to fit comfortably. The door to the umbilical sealed and the process began while the Red Cliffs went through undocking procedures.

"_Decontamination process complete. Welcome to Fort Charles Upham Orbital Station. Home of the UNSC Titan Proving Grounds Command. Entrance to this facility is acknowledging compliance with all UNSC laws and regulations. Unauthorized use of weaponry, information and data systems is prohibited. Report to briefing room four on deck twelve."_

The door leading to the facility unlocked and opened to reveal a personal drone floating at the far end. "_Greetings, Gunnery Chief Sergeant Sienna Ellison and Omsk training company, platoon three. I will escort you to briefing room four dash twelve."_

DI Ellison looked miffed at the VI controlled drone addressing her by her full name and rank, much less insinuating that we needed an escort. "I've been here before, drone. I know where deck twelve is."

"_Understood, Gunnery Chief Sergeant Sienna Ellison. However, other briefings and exercises are taking place currently within the facility. You and your training platoon do not have clearance to be in those rooms."_ The drone hovered in place completely oblivious to how obnoxious it came across as despite it's pleasant and upbeat synthesized voice.

She folded her arms and stared down the drone. "Are you insinuating that..." She paused and shook her head, growling and waving away the previous thought. "You know what? Disregard that. All this loitering and dawdling is wasting time. Lead the way, drone."

"_Of course, Gunnery Chief Sergeant Sienna Ellison. Follow me."_

"Sergeant Ellison or Drill Instructor Ellison will be fine."

"_Understood, Gunnery Chief Sergeant Sienna Ellison. Logging your

preference now."_

She glanced at the drone askance, "Are you deliberately fucking with me?"

The drone turned sideways but kept it's forward movement to address our DI while the platoon followed at just the right distance to hear the continued bickering. _"Negative, Sergeant Ellison. This is a standard convenience drone outfitted with an administrative VI and UNSC specific programming. This is not a personal pleasure VI."_

DI Ellison facepalmed and shook her head. "Just forget I said anything."

"_Understood, Sergeant Ellison. We have taken the liberty of calling for the cargo elevator to accommodate the size of your platoon. It should be arriving shortly."_

"You have my gratitude for doing your job, drone." DI Ellison deadpanned and continued walking down the hallway towards the elevator bank.

I chuckled at the antics alongside several other platoon members but stopped quickly when she looked at us over her shoulder with a gimlet eye.

True to it's word, the cargo elevator was waiting for us and we boarded it quickly. The rest of our travel to briefing room four was just as quick and quiet, with DI Ellison refusing to answer anything the drone said besides grunts to the affirmative or negative.

We parted ways with the drone and entered the briefing room which was dimly lit but had a magnificent view of Titan and Saturn. There was plenty of seating placed around a holotable centered in the middle of the room. Next to it was table with two terminal stations. DI Ellison, already in a great mood, barked her orders to the platoon. "Hurry and find a seat. Now."

Judging by her current state of mind brought on by the VI's lack of common sense it was a good idea to not piss her off anymore. We scurried to find a seat and sit quietly while she paced near the holotank and glared out the window.

After a few minutes of uncomfortable silence the door to the room opened and a group of three uniformed personnel entered. DI Ellison saw this and snapped to attention, yelling out a command to the room at large "On your feet."

The lead officer continued walking briskly towards the holotank and waved off the recognition for his rank "As you were. Take a seat, recruits."

He lifted a datapad in his hands and the holotank activated displaying a representation of the Titan. He fiddled with the datapad and the holographic Titan corresponded with his commands. The other officers took their seats at the two terminals and began synchronizing with the systems of our equipment and weapons.

Another few moments of silence and the lead officer was ready to conduct the briefing. "My apologies, Sergeant Ellison. We've been a

bit shorthanded here due to a glut of exercises being conducted on Titan at the moment."

DI Ellison nodded tensely and inquired "Not a problem, sir. Any change to the schedule for my recruits to get down there?"

He nodded and rubbed his chin while reading his datapad "No, sergeant. We actually have a pair of Pelicans on standby to take your platoon to the surface." Finishing his reading he looked up and around the room. "Alright, we're on a bit of a time crunch here so we'll make this short and sweet. I am Group Captain Fofana. At the terminals are Ensign First Grade Bernat and Staff Petty Officer El Sayed. We will be the controllers for your exercise today. If we give you an order you are expected to follow it. Aside from that, you will be competing against a VI controlling the drones and mechs down on the surface."

The representation of Titan magnified to focus on a location in the northern hemisphere, giving a holographic view of the terrain for the location we would be conducting our final training evaluation. A grid overlaying the holographic terrain highlighted a section marked in red. "This area shaded red is the area of operations for you exercise." The Captain made sure to give us all a look that meant business. "I cannot stress this enough. You are to stay in this area. There are other units conducting training and exercises on the planet and I do not want to have to deal with the hearings and paperwork because you were turned into a greasy stain after you disobeyed orders. Stay within these boundaries. Do not think you can get cute with strategy."

My heart began beating a bit faster at this point. It's one thing to know this was going to be a live fire exercise, but something altogether more harrowing knowing that other units could mistake us for targets. I glanced to my left and Galen looked just as disturbed. He glanced in my direction and shrugged. Returning my attention to the Captain and his briefing, I couldn't help but nervously drum my fingers on the helmet in my lap.

"Your objective is this facility. Your two drop zones are here." The locations were highlighted on the map showing a less than five kilometer distance from either drop zone to the facility. The facility itself was situated on a ridge in a series of small hills. Given the terrain around it and our starting locations, it wouldn't be too hard to attack it from different angles and achieve our objective. A fourth location was highlighted, again approximately five kilometers away. "Once you have cleared the facility you will rendezvous here for extraction."

He punched up new commands and a holographic representation of turrets, drones, and mechs appeared. "There will be patrols and defense forces consisting of human, asari, salarian, turian, and batarian robotic platforms. Additionally there will be point defense guns and turrets of different makes at strategic locations. And just to make things fun," A final figure was added to the mix and my nerves from before ratcheted up to insanely high levels, "Four YMIR mechs on patrol."

Were they serious? I glanced at DI Ellison but she looked bored so that must mean this was standard fare for this training. Great. Wonderful.

"You will gain control of the facility and defeat the forces located there. Any patrols you had yet to deal with prior to that will begin an assault on that location to take it back from you." Captain Fofana stood tall and folded his arms. "There are one of two ways this exercises typically ends. The recruits defeat all automated units in the training scenario and then are given the order to head to the rally point for extraction. Or they put up a fight, we give them the okay to retreat, and they are forced to perform a tactical withdrawal while being pursued resulting in a hot extraction."

The room was deathly silent aside from the sounds coming from the two terminals they Ensign and Petty Officer were busy interfacing with. Seeing our shocked silence the Captain frowned and spun in place to look at everyone in the room before asking out loud "Any questions?"

DI Ellison snapped out of her boredom and echoed his question, urging us to speak up "Don't be shy, Bravos. I know you have some concerns and queries rattling around in those empty heads of yours."

One of the recruits from second squad, Lim, raised her hand to be recognized. When Captain Fofana acknowledged her she stood and asked "What is the total number for the defending force, sir?"

Fofana brought up his data pad and searched it quickly, but Ensign Bernat answered without looking away from her terminal "We have one hundred functioning assets for this exercise, sir."

The captain nodded at the ensign and turned to address Lim "As Ensign Bernat just stated we have a one hundred strong force. That's counting everything together equally. Turrets. Mechs. Drones."

Once again the room went silent as we processed that huge number. Granted, our platoon was forty strong and these were relatively simple minded VI's but their numbers might prove to be overwhelming.

When no one asked any further questions I began to nervously debate on asking for clarification on the rules for this exercise. It sounded dumb in my head, but a part of me wanted to be absolutely sure what we were allowed to do.

Fearful of the eye rolling I bravely raised my hand. When the Captain looked my way and nodded I stood at the recognition "What are the rules for this engagement, sir?"

He stared at me for a moment and I got the impression he was debating whether to call me an idiot or hard of hearing, but he opted to explain, to my relief "Do not leave the area of operations. Do not get yourself or your fellow recruits killed. Complete the objective. Everything else is fair game."

DI Ellison was staring at me now and chose to speak up and simplify it in a way only she could "This is evaluation is to determine your capacity in combat, and combat is rarely if ever clean. It never follows the best laid plans. That said, you're only recruits. We're not looking for you to revolutionize war fighting with strategies no one has ever seen before or take on those YMIRs by yourself like some Star of Terra wannabe. This is no different than the sims you've

participated in. Remember that training and work as a team to complete this objective as quickly and efficiently as you can. We'll be grading you on that and only that."

The somber feeling in the room dissipated as we realized that the bar was being set low. We just needed to do what we'd been taught and practiced the entire time we'd been in MVC.

"If that's all then on your feet. Head down to hangar bay nine and report to the armory there. Best of luck to you, recruits." Captain Fofana dismissed us and walked towards his two crew members to discuss last minute preparations.

We shuffled out of the briefing room and back to the elevator where the drone was waiting for us yet again. _"Greetings again, Sergeant Ellison and Omsk Training Company, Platoon Three. I have again taken the liberty of calling the cargo elevator. It will arrive shortly."_

DI Ellison stared at the drone and deadpanned "You're a real gentleman, drone."

"_This VI has standard etiquette programming required of a UNSC convenience drone."_

"Lucky me."

"_Indeed, Sergeant Ellison. Your elevator is here. You will exit directly into hangar bay nine. Have a pleasant experience training on Titan, Omsk training company, platoon three."_

As we loaded into the elevator a second time I thought to myself how odd the phrasing was from the drone. 'Have a pleasant experience training on Titan'? What idiot programmed this VI?

When we exited the elevator the hangar bay was a flurry of activity as two pelicans and an accompanying group of small and sleek black fighter style vehicles were readied. A man nearby yelled to get our attention and waved us over. "Tango foxtrot three? Bravos? Line up here. Move it."

Quickly forming a line we started the process of armory issue. Glancing back at the odd drones I questioned my peers aloud. "What are those?"

Galen stared in the direction I was pointing and shrugged "Dunno. Never seen them before."

Shih was silent for a moment before she darkly replied. "Combat drones. Bombing, fighting, and surveillance. They call them Wombats."

I peered vessel and found that to be an odd name. Giving the another look Shih's way and I could see the dark brooding glare she had for these Wombat drones. Considering her heritage of being a Terra Novan, there was little doubt as to why. That planet was often maligned for being the primary hotbed of insurrection that earned it the moniker Terror Nova. Her experiences growing up there, despite being from a family of staunch Systems Alliance and UNSC supporters, must have given her a very dim view of these sort of vehicles. I can only

imagine what it would have been like to have them patrolling over the skies of Mindoir as I grew up. Constantly searching for threats and watching your every move. Fearing they might open fire on you or someone you know.

"Next!"

Stepping up next in line I was greeted by the armorer who scanned me and my weapons. Without even speaking to me he tossed a large package and barked "Next!"

I shuffled away trying to hold the package and my helmet but that only resulted in me dropping both. Embarrassed at the spectacle I was making I quickly bent down and grabbed my belongings, heading towards the designated pelican. Members of my squad and Third were already there, opening their packages and removing the contents. Medigel, repair kits, ammo blocks, grenades, missiles, charges and omnigel solutions for our fabricators. Tearing open my own and I saw that I had six ammo blocks, five hand grenades, a dozen micro grenades for my launcher, two high explosive warheads for my Cain, a deployable charge, a vial of omnigel, and the standard kits for emergencies. Scrutinizing the ammo blocks I activated my omnitool and scanned them. Standard dense metal blocks. Good for penetration. Nothing fancy.

Shrugging to myself I loaded the items into the various slots and pouches in my armor just as I had been trained to do. Everything had it's place and I had it drilled into memory of what to reach for when needed on instinct. I was right handed so grenades were along my waist on the left side. Ammo blocks at the bandolier slots on my chest plate. The charge along the small of my back. The repair kits along my outer left thigh and the medigel dispensers along my outer right thigh.

Grasping the thin container of omnigel solution I slid it into the special slot built into my left wrist vambrace. I twisted it into place when it met resistance and heard the click and hiss confirmation that let me know it had been seated properly.

Taking my seat I began trying to clear my mind of the clutter and nervous thoughts flooding it. Would we fail this exercise? Would I fail? Would someone get hurt? Or die? A million different things that could go wrong and my mind was imagining each one.

Why had I even wanted to be a squad leader in the first place? Taking a look around at the rest of my squadmates loaded into the troop bay of the pelican I could see they were just as on edge as I was. Closed eyes. Tense faces. Nervous energy. All of them with the same worries, only I had the additional worry of not leading us all into failure.

I tried calming my breathing and picturing success. Remembering why I was doing this. Being a squad leader was more than the perks of being in charge. It meant being responsible for everyone under your command. We had done this before. Gone through numerous training exercises with little to no major problems. I knew the people in my squad were good. We knew how to work as a team despite personality conflicts. If they did their job and I did mine, we should be fine.

Unless of course something wacky happens and then all bets are off.

Slamming my head back into the headrest I chided myself for returning to negative thoughts again.

"In your seats and helmets on! Flight crews begin final checks and lets get this show on the road!"

The pilot's voice brought me back to reality and I slid my helmet off my lap and onto my head. The sucking sensation lasting a second before the vacuum seal finished and the internal pressure of the entire suit equalized. The flight crewman for this pelican scrambled around checking harnesses and sensors before yelling back to the pilot. "We're green and ready for orbital insertion, ma'am!"

Not waiting for a reply the crewman threw himself into his own seat and secured himself. He paused and then nodded to himself, no doubt receiving orders. Completing the securing of his harness he spoke out loud to the rest of the occupants in the troop bay. "Alright, kiddies. Hold on tight. We're going to be dropping you in at combat speed. I doubt you've ever done this. Don't worry, it'll be over real quick."

I frowned behind the faceplate of my helmet. You mean these things could get worse?

As the pelican fired up the sensations of the eezo core added something new to my list of things making me uncomfortable.

The Pelican shook and rocked as the overhead clamps released the drophsip and we spun in place, accelerating slightly to exit the barrier curtain. In what seemed like no time at all, we began a rapid descent at the breakneck speed of a combat drop.

"Express elevator to hell! Going down!" I glared as much as I could at the crewman, who was clearly enjoying this. Thankfully my face was hidden behind a helmet which obscured the combination of grimace, glare, horror and overwhelming desire to not puke.

"Oh shit. Oh shit. Oh shit. Oh shit."

One of the recruits from the other squad was doing a pretty bang up job of saying what every single one of us was thinking. That she could even speak and do so repeatedly was impressive. I was afraid that if I even breathed I'd have an accident.

Thankfully I managed to outlast the nearly twenty minutes of hell unscathed. As I felt the dropship slow it's descent and push more forward than downward I decided to check on the rest of my squad. "First, you guys still alive?"

All the status lights returned green accompanied by grumblings and grunts.

Taking my question as a sign, or maybe I just had great timing, the flight crewman released himself from his seat and began readying the troop bay for a combat drop. Activating his omnitool caused a turret to slide down from the roof of the compartment, aiming towards the still closed doorway. "Out of your seats and in a line on either side

of the troop bay, kiddies. When we touch down you are going to file out and do your thing. Lets try to make this snappy, alright?"

Complying with the command we released the harnesses from our seats and prepared ourselves like we had been trained. We were stacked on either side, weapons at the ready and prepared to storm out of the troop bay and create a perimeter when Captain Fofana contacted us to begin the evaluation. "Tango Foxtrot Three Third Platoon, please lock and load weapons on your person and prepare for the examination to begin."

Reaching to their various storage location on my armor I slid out the requisite ammo for my weapons and began loading them with a practiced ease that bordered on rote numbness that belied my nerves. One by one, I finished and slid the weapons back into place, the magnetic strips holding them in place while they cycled through self diagnostics. I peered through the HUD display across my faceplate relaying the information to observe my fellow recruits. Some were rocking back and forth slightly, silently talking to themselves. Others fumbled with their weapons, their nerves ratcheted so tightly that their hands were clumsy. A few were done and holding the hand rail above, looking around in a daze. I began to wonder how I had looked to my peers.

A soft beep brought me back from my musings and I saw the visual confirmation on my HUD displaying an all clear on my weapons. I retrieved my M392 Saber and held the rail above.

"Weapons check. Weapons green. Environmental systems check. Environmental systems green. Comms check. Comms green. Sensors check. Sensors green. Evaluation is green. IFF tags labeled hostile to OpFor mechs. Third Platoon call sign Dhole 1 through 4 you are cleared to engage. Happy hunting."

The pelican landed with a heavy thud that rattled everything inside. The bay door slammed down providing a ramp and the overhead turret slid forward and began scanning it's line of fire for enemy targets. Armed with an assault rifle, the crewman crouched beneath the turret and behind an omnishield, yelling "Go, go, go, go!"

We surged out and created a small semi circular perimeter a good distance away from the pelican and it's thrusters. If we could avoid being melted by those then that was one thing off my list of things that could go wrong.

Laying on my belly and observing my surroundings I noticed two things immediately. One, it was raining. Two, and more importantly, it was freezing. Scratch that. It was fucking freezing. Like, I needed to get off the ground immediately because even in my temperature controlled suit it was fucking freezing.

As quickly as it had arrived, the pelican closed it's doors and lifted off, leaving us behind and lone on this cold and rainy planet.

"So, we can get off the ground now, right?"

I nodded at Shih's requesting and stood, still aiming my weapon off into the distance but seeing nothing. Not that I could see much. This

rain was coupled with a sort of mist that was barely visible nearby but reduced visibility about three hundred meters or so. But what I could see what a dingy beige landscape of barren rock with protrusions and depressions scattered throughout.

Grinding my heel into the ground below me I corrected myself. Not rock. Ice.

Looking over at my counterpart in squad three, Linhares, I questioned her on what she wanted to do next. "So you want point or me?"

She glanced off in the direction of our waypoint marker, nearest her, and shrugged. "Looks like I'm closest. We'll take the lead. Team one, you're on point. Let's go."

Her squad formed up and moved out in two groups, scanning the horizon for threats but it was largely a moot point. The visibility might be bad, but most of our other sensors still functioned. What was troubling was the terrain. It was largely flat with little major variation. Large puddles here and there that created depressions and small divets or trenches. The occasional bump or distortion in the surface of the ice no taller than hip height. Which meant we could see the mechs coming. And they could see us.

Once it was our turn to move out I lead our first team with Barrera leading the second team as a rear security. Taking a moment I brought up the terrain for the objective area and was reminded that there was a sort of wadi or arroyo before it a series of small hills, with the facility situated right on top of an elevated cliff overlooking the riverbed below. Frowning I imagined the mechs would have no trouble seeing through this low visibility and would begin firing on us from their higher vantage point. Looking up I could only hope the visibility was just as thick if not more so at a higher elevation. It would make it difficult when we began our assault, but it might provide enough cover to negate the advantages of higher elevation they would have.

We kept a fast pace, not quite jogging but quick enough that we would reach the edge of the riverbed shortly. Infrequent comms checks with the other two squads let us know that both forces were moving at roughly the same speed. Periodically I would notice the remains of mechs or vehicles half buried in the ice and wondered if the majority of the landscape was natural or if centuries of training exercises had sculpted this area into it's present form.

After about twenty minutes of our fast paced movement the terrain began to slope slightly, down towards the arroyo. Checking the waypoint we were nearing a kilometer in distance from the objective, meaning we were nearly in the teeth of their defenses now.

Linhares called for a halt and scrambled forward towards a small ditch with two of her squadmates. Laying down in the puddle filled ditch, she activated her suits sensors array from passive to active while her two squadmates nervously watched either side. "Heads up. Active scan incoming."

I turned and gave a hand signal for my squad to spread out and prepare for an attack. Turning back around I aimed down my own firing sector and anxiously waited.

Slowly my HUD filled with a much more detailed view of the world around me as Linhares' sensors relayed information. I could see the hills now, which were really small and so close it was amazing we couldn't see them this close up. I could also see how the land sloped gently down from our direction but rose up sharply at the hills, creating a steep incline in some spots and outright cliffs in others.

I could also see that at about two hundred meters away to our left there was an automated turret and a small patrol force of about a dozen mechs. And they had seen Linhares.

"Contact left! Turret!" I swung my DMR and aimed down the first mech I saw before opening fire. Galen unleashed a full volley with his M37 Falcon, the six micro grenades shredding into the grouping that had already opened fire on Linhares' position.

The turret fired a volley of small rockets at Linhares's position, having locked onto her suit's sensors. The micro missiles slammed into the ice surrounding their position, blasting away the hard as rock ice and sending chips and slivers flying outwards at speeds that activated the kinetic shielding of some of the recruits. Seeing as pointless to try and be stealthy I gave the order for my squad to fully activate their sensors in the hopes that it would give us an even better idea of what we were facing and maybe that would draw some of the fire off Linhares and her squadmates long enough to take down this threat.

Rounds from heavier autocannons and missile turrets began showering our positions from somewhere off in the distance. I glanced upwards through the mist and rain to see muzzle flashes coming from the hills. No doubt the positions there had locked onto us and would begin shredding us.

Yelling to Donat I ordered him to use his missile launcher to take out that turret. We needed to get out of this quickly.

Donat dropped his weapon and shouldered his M41, aiming at the turret. Our squad unleashed a storm of gunfire in order to give him time to sync and lock on with the turret without being harassed. The cobra in launched it's own volley of two missiles while the turrets defenses flared, creating a kinetic barrier. The missiles performed as designed, punching through the turret's kinetic barriers and reactive armor, leaving it a gutted and inoperative mess.

At the same time I dropped my Saber to pull out the Cain and waited for the next muzzle flash from the hills. When it came the Cain's targeting VI locked onto the location and I activated the power cell. "Cain out!"

The launcher kicked heavily, sending a bright blue bolt at the hills that exploded with a deafening boom that shook the ground and added thick chunks of ice to the methane rain pouring down.

"Contact right! Turret!" I panicked and looked to my right but saw nothing. Double checking and I saw the comms had come from the other force. Frowning I scanned deep in that direction and saw that off in the distance they too had encountered a similar setup to our own. Even worse, we seemed to be bottled into a narrow corridor leading to the objective, with the turrets and mech forces on either outer

edge.

They had us in a crossfire and we had yet to encounter the bulk of the force. Or any of the YMIRs.

"Linhares! We're going to swing around to the left, cover us!" Between firing her assault rifle Linhares sent a confirmation to my HUD and ordered her squad to increase their rate of fire to cover our move.

I turned and looked towards my squadmates furthest to the right from the attack. "Move left! We get those mechs in a crossfire and tear them down!"

Galen was the first to move, standing up from his prone position and running hunched over behind an omnishield until he reached the far end of Barrera's team. He slide feet first into a new firing position and yelled "Next!"

We got about halfway through that move when the something whacky that I feared happening happened. One of Linhares' squad recoiled as their kinetic barriers were slammed into by the fierce fire of a heavy autocannon from the right flank. The recruit rolled to away from the fire and into one of the puddles dotting the landscape to provide some cover. Linhares peered over her right shoulder and screamed "Contact right! Two YMIRs! More mechs! In the riverbed! They're moving up on us!"

Growling at myself I wondered if it was my usual pessimistic self that predicted this or did bad things follow me? Not having time to debate the nuances between the two I egged my team on to aggressively make our move so that we could cover Linhares's squad since there was no way in hell we could take on a pair of YMIRs in open terrain like this.

By the time we had swung fully around, the first group of mechs had been whittled down. We quickly focused on shredding those down those final mechs in a hail of mass accelerated slugs that shattered their shielding in showers of purple and gold sparks.

"Linhares, fall back and swing around us!" She sent a confirmation status to my HUD and began withdrawing Third Squad, who had already started to see shields failing and weapons overheat from having to fight two fronts at once.

As they scrambled around I had Donat launch another volley, this time at the first YMIR, knowing it would be largely ineffective but it would get it's attention off Third. The missiles screamed from the launcher but this time they were met with defensive lasers that seared them before they could impact. The resulting explosion rocked the YMIR back but left it unharmed.

Yeah, I kinda figured that would happen. Frustrated I ran through our options. Missiles were out. Grenades might be shot down as well. And with the exception of the sniper rifles Shih and Kekoa carried, our standard firearms were not going to punch through the armor and kinetic barriers these things had. Maybe we should ignore them?

I snorted at the idea but then thought better of it. Perhaps distract them? Keep them occupied while we moved on? The Captain did say we

didn't need to destroy all forces to achieve the objective.

I aimed down a six legged salarian mech that had decided to make a charge towards our lines and hit it four times in rapid succession, breaking the shielding. Before I could hit it again to put it down, it was ripped apart from assault rifle fire from someone else. Looking around I noticed Linhares's squad had almost fully executed their move around us and now had the far left flank. Leaving me and my squad to bear the brunt of the oncoming YMIRs and the gaggle of mechs accompanying them.

Realizing we'd be stuck going in circles trying to outflank this group with these YMIRs pounding us I contemplated calling for my squad to move out again when something caught my eye. Shih was laying prone and aiming her M99 Valiant, but the way she was laying exposed her back towards me slightly. And I saw the deployable charge placed on the small of her back, just like all the rest of us.

Looking at the path the lead YMIR would take if we flanked again I noticed the ruins of the turret not far from the next position. A plan forming in my head I made a quick decision.

Checking to my immediate left I saw Finch firing his M739 Typhoon in steady bursts, wearing down the mechs so everyone else could finish them off. I rolled over to get next to him and grabbed the M14 charge from his back. He jerked his head at me and yelled "What the fuck are you doing?"

I jerked my head towards the YMIR and yelled back "Putting these in the YMIR's path. Cover me."

He shook his head and focused his fire on the YMIR itself, drawing it's attention, Setting the charges to proximity detonation I sat up and chucked the pair in what I hoped would be the path of the lead YMIR. Their small stabilizing fins activated and helped them spin before sinking their jagged edges into hard ice.

Throwing myself back down to the ground I opened a comms to Linhares "Val! Take Third to the far side of the turret and leave your cobra gunner there. We're going to try and walk that thing into a trap."

Her reply didn't come immediately and I busied myself by helping to take down more mechs, my DMR doing it's best to take advantage of it's larger slug size to reduce shielding but fourteen shots before an overheat could only do so much. Thankfully the YMIR was being considerate and helping me find time to let my weapon cool off by firing it's own autocannon at me and giving me an excuse to scramble out of it's sights before something else pissed it off.

When Linhares' squad had taken place I couldn't contain my eagerness. Their placement was taking advantage of the sloping terrain to give them some measure of cover and creating a firing line that began tearing into the mechs nearly from behind. Realizing the threat, the majority turned their attention to return fire from this direction, giving me and my squad enough time to make a mad dash for the turret remains.

Halfway there and a loud kaboom and concussive wall of force from behind me that showered everything in a mist of ice particles let me

know something had stepped on one of the mines. Sliding head first into position, I spun back around and was elated to see the YMIR had stepped on the first charge. The resulting explosion had severed a good portion of it's lower left leg, leaving it to stumble forward and hobble around helplessly. Seeing that the second mine would probably not be detonated but was still close enough that it could cause some issues I looked back at the destroyed turret. Linhares' heavy weapons squad member was there, hiding behind the pillar and firing away with her Harrier. Glancing at Donat, I saw him not far away from that location and urged him to get there. "Donat! Get to that turret and break out the cobra again!"

He smoothly rolled out of his firing position and scrambled for the turret, a few slugs pinging off his kinetic barriers. Once there he dropped his rifle to the ground and pulled out the cobra missile launcher. His companion behind the turret saw his actions and copied them. Opening the comms between our squads I gave the order carefully. "Dhole 1 heavy weapons will fire the first volley and make the lasers defenses activate. Dhole 3 you follow up on his firing and take advantage of the lasers needing to cool down before firing again." When I saw a ready status light for third squad I detonated the second mine remotely, sending another shower of ice into the air and weakening the YMIR's flagging kinetic shielding "Fire!"

Once more the pair of missiles launched and flew at their target and once more they ripped the kinetic shielding only to be incinerated by the defensive laser system. But when the second volley followed right behind it the lasers didn't have enough time to cool off and fire again. The pair hit the YMIR in the chest and blew apart the plating and laser defense turrets there and severed the left arm. With only one good leg to stand on, the sheer force of the missiles knocked the YMIR back hard enough that it stumbled and fell.

Now that the machine was decommissioned the two squads unleashed hell on the remaining YMIR and mechs. The falcon gunner from third squad distracted the YMIR while Vercesi fired a full volley from his Hydra at it's exposed back. After sustaining massive damage, the second YMIR executed it's self destruct mechanism and the resulting explosion scattered the cohesion of the remaining mechs.

Mopping up the final few mechs I glanced off towards the hills again and appraised the remaining turrets there still firing upon our platoon. The other squads were pinned down in the same manner as we had been but they were faring far less better. Their turret was destroyed but the bulk of the two forces of mechs still remained operational. The real problem was the single remaining YMIR, which was steadily whittling away at them.

Making the choice to aid them I opened a comms link to Linhares and appraised her on my idea "Val! Take your squad towards the facility and begin probing. Find out what sort of defenses they have. We're going to go and help Second and Fourth!"

Not bothering to respond she sent a green status light to my HUD confirming his agreement. Wasting no time I reloaded my Cain and aimed at another turret in the hills. Another satisfying thunderous explosion reduced the incoming indirect fire, giving everyone more breathing room. Placing the spent weapon on my back, I ordered my squad into a fast paced jog to get close enough that we could assist the rest of the platoon without accidentally shooting them.

Once in position I checked in with the squad leaders "Dhole 2 and Dhole 4, Dhole 1 coming in from the southwest. Check your fire." Yet again green status lights confirmed my message was received and I gave my squad the command to let it rip "Open fire! Vercesi! Hit that first YMIR from behind!"

My squad rushed forward to new firing positions while unleashing a wave of fire that tore into the right flank of the nearest cluster of mechs. We were rewarded with shielding flaring and popping in an indigo and gold display as the mechs were caught unaware and mowed down quickly. With the odds more firmly in our favor, Vercesi aimed and unleashed his volleys. The YMIR tried to turn and face the oncoming projectiles but was still blindsided. The missiles shredded the outer armor of it's back and severed the right arm of the large mech but unfortunately the mech was still operational. And gunning for us now.

Not a major problem. Second and Third had regrouped with our assistance and nearly massacred the remaining mechs. With the YMIR focused on us, one of their cobra or hydra gunners could tear it apart from behind with a well place volley.

Or so I thought. Linhares's voice over the comms dispelled that bit of wishful thinking. "All Dhole call signs, we've got a lot of turrets at the facility. I hope you guys still have cobra and hydra missiles left."

Well isn't that just fucking perfect.

Frowning I recounted the tally on our firings and began cursing under my breath. Hoping that the armorer had been kind and given him an additional cartridge I asked hopefully, "Please tell me you guys have a reload."

In unison, Donat and Vercesi glanced at me from their cover and shook their heads.

Cursing to myself again I opened comms to all squad leaders and asked for a missile count. The replies I got were less than pleasing. Seven total volleys is all we had left. Three Cobra. Four Hydra. The YMIR continued it's plodding pace forward towards us, pausing every so often to fire it's missile launcher in an attempt to destroy the terrain we hid behind. I grumbled as I now realized the true intention of having these massive mechs and turrets attack us early on. They were meant to make a platoon waste their precious missiles so that when they assaulted the facility itself they would be at a disadvantage dealing with the remaining turrets.

Sighing, I realized we had volunteered ourselves for YMIR duty by virtue of my stupid choices to waste our missiles. "Dhole 2 and Dhole 4, take your squads and assist Dhole 3 in assaulting and taking the facility. We'll draw the YMIR away and figure out a way to deal with it."

"We're gonna what?" Galen's bewildered voice followed my own almost immediately.

"Spread out more and make it confused about who to target. Maybe we can make it run out of missiles." I wasn't sure if that was actually

a viable tactic but it was the best I could come up with on the spot.

After a few seconds of grumbling and complaining the squad began playing a game with the YMIR that oddly reminded me of an arcade game me and Ari would play as kids back on Mindoir. Whack An Unggoy, where you went around stomping on Unggoy heads that popped out of the ground. Only we were the Unggoys this time.

It's safe to say I'd never be looking at that game the same way ever again.

We were never going to punch through the shielding of that thing and even if we did our firearms would be lucky to puncture any of the heavy armor plating. The longer we played this game, the more likely the chances were that one of us would get unlucky.

And while I doubted the evaluation team back on the Charles Upham would let the VI actually kill us, they weren't exactly going to let it go easy on us either. Even if the rounds and explosives being used in this exercise were of reduced lethality, all it would take is one mistake and my worries about just passing this exam would pale in comparison to taking responsibility for the death or injury of a squad member.

It was my own fault we'd gotten into this predicament with my trigger happy usage of our missiles and it was up to me to get us out of this. I just didn't know how. Running away from the YMIR might be feasible, but it would eventually follow us to the facility. Or we could try to drag it further away first. Put a little distance between the mech and the facility so it had a longer trek.

My earlier trick of placing a deployable charge would only cripple it, but that might be enough to buy us enough time to rejoin the platoon, secure the facility and then leave for the rendezvous point for extraction.

Glancing at the exposed area of it's back I wondered if I could lob a grenade in there to tear away at the lighter internal shielding surrounding the most vital parts of the mech. I doubted it. If I could make a throw like that then I'd be playing grifball professionally instead of being here in the UNSC. Besides, a hand grenade probably wouldn't even have enough power to completely destroy or disable the mech. A charge, sure, but I wasn't going to be able to make a toss with that one either.

For as difficult as that would be I was better off just walking up to the damn thing and planting the charge directly on it's exposed back.

I really shouldn't have thought that because my mind immediately asked the obvious, and obviously insane, follow up.

Well, why don't you?

Staring at the exposed back of the mech that stray thought blossomed into full on crazy. Looking at Galen nearby I yelled out "Kemp! Toss me your M14!"

Galen turned his head and despite having his faceplate polarized I

just knew he was giving me a look that questioned my sanity. "Why? Blowing off part of it's leg isn't going to stop it."

Holding out my hand in an expectant manner, he sighed and threw his charge in my direction. The throw was a bit off but I managed to scramble out of my cover to grab it and sync it with my omnitool, setting the explosive device to detonate with maximum power. Taking a deep breath to calm my nerves I spoke to my squad with more composure than I actually felt. "Here's what we're going to do. Keep that thing facing away from me while I try to plant this charge on it. Watch your fire."

"Uh, did you just say what I think you said?"

"Are you out of your fucking mind?"

"You're absolutely fucking crazy."

"If I shoot you it's an accident. No hard feelings."

I frowned and glared in Finch's direction at the last comment. Peering out from behind the chunk of ice I was hiding behind, I saw that the YMIR was at least thirty meters away and with its back towards me. Seeing as how the squad had managed to spread out enough that the YMIR was hardly moving, only turning to engage new threats, I had maybe a few seconds before it picked up on my movements to sneak up behind it. Not nearly enough time for me to clear that distance. I knew I was fast but I wasn't that damn fast.

Steeling myself one last time, I placed the deployable charge on the magnetic strip of my left hip, returned my DMR to the magnetic holsters strips along my back and grabbed my M7 Hurricane submachine gun. Reminding myself that if anything goes wrong I could still use my biotics to buy a second or two, I leaped over my ice cover and began sprinting faster than I had ever done before in my life.

Time slowed with each breath and step taking forever. Memories flooded my mind of the YMIR stomping down the streets of Nouveau Basel during the raid. I forced those thoughts from my head as dread and focus increased in equal amounts as I neared the halfway mark and the YMIR sensed my presence. It turned across its body to the left, bringing its missile launcher into aim quickly and targeting me. Remembering everything I had ever learned about using my biotics I stared at the barrel of the launcher and drew upon my eezo nodules to will a warp effect of dark shredding energy around the offending weapon. The summoned energy surged through my spine and left my head spinning as each step sent a massive tingling shock up my legs. I thrust my left arm in the mnemonic training that had been drilled into my head by Matriarch Malegos and refined by First Sergeant Yilmaz.

A ball of blue energy surged around the YMIR's left arm, meshing with and shredding its own mass effect powered kinetic barriers. The warp lost most of its power fighting against the barrier but succeeded in throwing the aim of the launcher off course. It fired a missile that rocketed past my head to the right before it could lock on, flying away harmlessly into the misty distance of Titan.

Gasping for breath from my exertions, I ignored the yelling of obscenities and reprimands over the comms in my ear and barreled my

way past the mech on the right, circling around behind it and staying close to avoid it's only weapon. It immediately spun to target me but I found the will to push myself further or become a red stain across Titan. Reaching down I snatched the M14 charge off my hip leaping mid stride and slapped it against the exposed inner armor plating. Coming down from such an overreaching and powerful jump I stumbled and nearly lost my footing, falling forward onto my hands and knees but I quickly scrambled to my feet and began trying to put as much distance between myself and the YMIR as I could.

"Open fire! Open fire! Get that thing's attention!" Barrera's orders to the rest of the squad were followed by an unleashing of fire from all directions.

Seeing as how I hadn't been splattered from behind by missile targeting me right up my ass I lifted my left arm and activated my omnitool. While working to arm and detonate the charge I lost track of where to place my feet and stumbled, crashing sideways onto my right shoulder and skidding across the icy floor while the M7 slipped from my grasp and went in another direction.

Grunting at the harsh impact, I glanced over my shoulder and figured I had cleared enough distance and scrambled into a small depression to finish arming the charge. Obtaining the synched confirmation, I warned the squad and once again drew upon my biotics to will a mass effect. This time I was going to try something a bit more difficult that I had only practiced a few times but never mastered. A field of increased mass surrounded me creating a crude barrier. It wasn't as refined as the personalized physical barriers that hugged the contours of the body like a skilled and experienced biotic could create but it would do. "Headache!"

As one the squad ducked behind their cover and shielded themselves. I triggered the charge and the was rewarded with seeing the YMIR sheared in half as the explosive force ripped it's torso in two and triggered the internal self destruct device of the mech. A split second later a wave of concussive force, chunks of icy slush and shredded fragments of the mech slammed into my barrier. I held firm for as long as I could, straining against the bulk of the blast with my biotics before I released it with a huge gasp of breath. The remaining bits hit the kinetic barriers, with little of it getting through and impacting against the plates of my armor.

And just like that it was over. The sound of fighting could be heard in the distance as the other squads forced their way towards the facility but all around us a calm had descended. Squad members stood from cover and ambled over towards the wreckage of the mech. I was still laying in the final position I had come to rest in, shocked, exhausted, dizzy, and out of breath.

Finch was the first to reach me, calming walking up to my side and kneeling down with an M739 cradled in his arms. Keeping eyes on the YMIR's remains he spoke calmly and clearly through his voice module. "That was the dumbest fucking thing I've ever seen someone do. Impressive as hell, but just fucking stupid."

Kekoa walked up next, kicking my M7 back in my direction and echoed Finch's sentiments by adding on his own insults at my expense "Really fucking stupid. You do realize they can't give you the Star of Terra for fighting mechs in a training exercise, right?"

My shock finally wore off and I sat up, feeling quite proud of my fucking stupid and suicidal stunt. I looked back over shoulder at Kekoa and sarcastically replied "Really? What do they give for that then?"

"I'm pretty sure DI Ellison is going to choke you to death, so there's that." Barrera had joined us and looked down at me through her unpolarized visor with a hint of annoyance. "You're not hurt so get your ass up. We have an eval to finish."

I mock saluted her and stood, placing the Hurricane back on my hip and pulling the DMR from my back. Checking it's function I smiled and looked at the rest of the squad, egging them on, "Alright, YMIR killers, who wants to go show the rest of the platoon how to really fuck shit up?"

Shih ran triumphantly towards the remains of the YMIR and stood atop it, holding her sniper rifle to the sky and letting out a primal roar through her voice module. The rest of the squad felt her infectious cheer and thrust their weapons into the air and let loose their own roars of approval.

After a quick check of our weapons and gear we jogged down the incline towards the other side of the riverbed, and towards the explosions and gunfire coming from that direction. Half way across and we encountered a sticky and muddy stream of liquid hydrocarbons that slowed our crossing. Finally reaching the far shore and we could see how the facility had been defended. The terrain from the briefing room showed the facility had been on an elevated spur jutting out into the riverbed behind us. To assault it meant going up a steep incline on either side of the spur. Glancing at the shattered remains of mechs that had rolled to the bottom of the hill and into the riverbed told me that maybe the other squads had one hell of a fight.

Opening up comms with the other squad leaders I notified them of our presence and requested to know what would be the preferred route to take. "All Dhole call signs, Dhole 1 at the bottom of the facility and ready to proceed upwards. Suggest route, over?"

The explosions had died down but the gunfire still raged as we waited for the reply. Then Duong of Fourth Squad answered, "Dhole 1 we're mopping up here. Got some hold outs. Dhole 3 has already breached the facility and notified the examiners above. We're on the clock and awaiting orders to head to the LZ. Come up the East slope about 60 meters away from the facility and halt before reaching the summit. Mechs still farther to the East hiding behind turret tower taking pot shots and we have no angle. Take care of them please."

"Dhole 4 it would be our pleasure. Will inform when in position." I glanced back at the squad and shrugged, "Looks like we got more work to do. Barrera take your team first."

Azevedo grumbled, "Why do we get point?"

Grinning at her I snarkily replied "Well, when someone on your team runs down a YMIR then you guys can take the easy jobs. Deal?"

Barrera snorted through her voice module and instructed her team to move out. "It's fine, team. Unlike Shepard I won't tell you to engage in hand to hand combat with the mechs. Let's go."

As they began tracing along the bottom of the slope eastwards, Shih looked at me shook her head, drawling "She's right, you know. That was bonkers. What the hell do they teach people on Bekenstein?"

I frowned at the insinuation that I was from Bekenstein, which had been started after Galen thought it would be hilarious to call me Becky. It was a bit too much like the kids back at Sargasso and La Garza calling me Mindy. "I'm not from Bekenstein."

She nodded and shrugged, needling me some more. "Right. Mindoir. My bad. So what the hell are they teaching people on those outer colonies?"

Galen laughed and elbowed me playfully "How to be one hell of a UNSC Marine, right?"

Rolling my eyes I stood and prepared to follow Barrera's team "Right. They squeezed that in between lessons on human history and how not to be bored out of your mind on a farming colony. Grab your gear and let's move."

Trudging again for the short distance, we linked back up with Barrera's team and then proceeded to move up the side of the hill slowly. Nearly reaching the summit I gave the signal to halt and radioed in "All Dhole call signs. Dhole 1 in place. Ready to proceed on your word."

"Dhole 1 I'm sick and tired of being shot at. Clear to engage."

I gave the order to spread out and crawl the rest of the way forward. As we crested the summit, I could clearly see a team of five battered mechs with assault rifles stacked up behind the remains of a turret about 20 meters away. "Light 'em up, First!"

There's overkill, and then there's what we did. We could have shredded them with standard fire but we felt ornery and added in a few grenade for extra emphasis. Pretty sure we'd get an earful for that once we were back topside, but this looked to be the last of the mechs.

One of the upper torsos of a mech was tossed so violently that it launched my direction and skidded to a halt right in front of my. Yet again I cursed my luck as the half mech lunged itself at me awkwardly, latching onto my DMR and helmet. A surge of electrical shock went through my body and I tensed, biting down on my tongue as I stifled a scream. We fell backwards in a tumble of limbs down the side of the hill and into the hydrocarbon stream.

My head was spinning and my immediate fear was that my suit had been compromised somehow, but when that fear was unfounded a new one cropped up in it's place. Namely the half mech grabbing at me and pushing me into the stream. I tried to pry it's hands off me and disentangle myself but these damn mechs were strong. Considering it a lost cause I summoned my biotics once more, this time using a method I had perfected ages ago and encased my fist in an increased mass field. The usual tingles and feeling of slight vertigo accompanied

the activation of my biotics as my body encased it's self in a corona of dark energy. My right fist smashed into the head of the mech, not really loosening it's grip but definitely shattering whatever sensors were housed there.

The impact provided me with enough momentum to flip us over and pin the mech beneath me. Wrenching my left arm free I cocked it back and triggered the quick action function of my omnitool. The automated response was to activate the fabrication unit to flash forge an omni blade in just about a second. Once the searing orange silicon carbide blade was in place I punched downwards, cleaving right into the shoulder and upper torso of the mech. It spasmed and sparks flew from the injury site as I drew back and punch again, this time slicing through the neck and upper left shoulder.

The mech sputtered lifelessly and released me. I sat up on my knees and glared at the mech, dismissing my omniblade and snatching my DMR. I pushed my self to my feet and out of the stream only to feel the weariness in my body. Between charging down a YMIR, using my biotics multiples times, and tumbling downhill in a wrestling match with a mech, I was ready to take a big nap. After a meal. Some food and then sleep the whole way back to Earth.

"Are you alright?" I looked upwards at Barrera's concern voice over the comms and nodded. Seeing that I was fine she mocked me "Jesus, Shepard. I was joking about hand to hand combat with mechs."

"Ha ha, Griz." I didn't even have the energy to make my sarcasm sound like anything more than an effort just to speak.

Shih piled on with the mocking "That's gotta suck having to climb your way back up the hill again."

Feeling the tiredness creeping in and making me cranky I began my ascent and snapped back "You want to tell me something I don't know?"

"You have this thing called a weapon that lets you shoot things at a distance so you don't have to wrestle them. You should use it next time." I paused in my ascent to glare at her smart assed remark and the accompanying howls of laughter from the squad.

Seeing no reason to rush I slowly made my way to the top and was greeted by the rest of the platoon. Linhares looked at me askance and frowned "What the hell happened to you?"

Before I could reply Vercesi glibly supplied his fictional reasoning "Special biotic test. Shep has to wrestle mechs during this exercise."

The rest of the platoon stared at me as one in shock. I shook my head and glared at the rest of my squad which was doing their collective best to swallow back their giggles. "That's not what happened."

"Okaaaaay?" Linhares looked like she was confused as to what the joke was but shook it off and pointed off in the direction of the extraction point. "We got the order to head out. All mechs defeated and the eval is done."

I perked up slightly at that news, curious about what else might have been said "Did we pass? What did they say?"

Duong shrugged "Standard stuff. Job well done." He frowned behind his non-polarized faceplate and stared at me curiously "They did mention that DI Ellison wants to talk with you as soon as we get back topside."

At that remark my squad lost their battle with laughter and fell into another series of howls and jeers like a group of rabid hyenas. All I could do was stew in silence. I was pretty sure she was going to rip me a new asshole for what I'd done on this eval.

"So since you guys didn't help take the facility we figured you get to have point." I goggled at Serrano's logic. It's not like we weren't busy or anything. My exhaustion and fraying temper were warring with the last vestiges of my self control.

Before I say something I would regret Barrera chimed in "That's fine. YMIR killers lead the way. Right, Shep?" I snorted and threw my hands up in the air, just wanting to get everything over with so I could get that meal and some sleep. Griz chuckled at my antics and patted my shoulder "It's fine. Team two will take the lead again. You've earned it."

I nodded my appreciation and she slapped me playfully upside my helmet before leading team two out. Watching her and the team walk away I was filled with dread as my mind began conjuring up all the ways I was going to be reprimanded by DI Ellison when she saw me.

"You sure you're alright, Luis?" Galen's worried question brought me out of my pessimistic thoughts.

I nodded and allayed his concern "Yeah. Just tired and annoyed. The biotics really take it out of you."

He nodded and chuckled, punching me lightly in the shoulder "No kidding. That was brutal how you punched that mech before you sliced it up with your omniblade." He mimicked the motions of my biotic strike and stabbing with overblown dramatics.

Seeing his exaggerated interpretation of the events clued me in on how ridiculous it must have looked to everyone else. I could almost begin to see the humor in the situation. That is until Duong asked "Wait. You seriously had to wrestle with a mech for your biotic test?"

My shoulders sagged and I glared at Vercesi. At least this time he had the decency to try to cover up his laughter.

* * *

><p>Charles Upham Orbital Station, Titan, Saturn, Sol System, Local Interstellar Cluster; December 3rd, 2572 [Standardized Terran Calendar] 1309 [Standardized Terran Time]

I lowered my head and arched my back, trying to take the strain of my body weight off my overtaxed upper body. The sweat pouring down my face kept getting into my eyes and stinging, causing me to blink

rapidly and shake my head from side to side.

A pair of black standard issue UNSC combat boots with a high shine paced back in forth across the cold gray metal plate floor in front of me. Each step reverberating through the floor and into my arms as the wearer of the boots seemed to want to stomp hard enough to dent the titanium. To say DI Ellison was pissed off at me would be an understatement. She knelt down next to me and stared, the barely contained fury in her expression making me look away. "You look like you're having difficulty there, recruit. Flip over. Supine bicycle."

Grunting at the strain of following her command I let myself drop to the floor and slowly rolled over, assuming the on my back where I would piston my knees into my chest and try to touch them with the opposite elbow. This was the tenth different exercise she'd had me perform so far under her scrutiny. Aside from the commands she had yet to say a word, just the silent seething glare and pacing back and forth. At times I could swear her eyes flashed and her stance and legs would twitch for a split second. Like she wanted to kick me in the midsection or stomp on my head.

This time she didn't hold herself back, growling at me over the pace of my movements, "This exercise it to be done at a slow cadence for maximum effect, recruit. Can you do that? Show me you are not some inbred block head outer colony bastard that can't follow orders."

I bit back on my own anger, frustrated with my conflicted feelings. Fine, I knew I had screwed up on Titan. What I did was over the top and unnecessary, but it had worked. Why couldn't I get any credit for that? They did say that the rules of engagement were open. My lower abs and upper thighs began protesting in exhaustion, having already been obliterated by previous exercises. DI Ellison stood with folded arms and this time her look was bordering incredulous anger. I quickly realized she expected me to answer her rhetorical question, "Yes, Drill Instructor"

Her gaze hardened and she leaned forward so that I had to look directly up at her sneering face "You realize why you're here, correct?"

My abs were now on fire and all I wanted to do was let my legs drop to the ground, but I knew the moment I did that she'd just double whatever other punishments I had coming. The only thing I could salvage from any of this was to at least not let her win the battle of wills. "My actions on Titan were unsatisfactory, Drill Instructor."

DI Ellison's faced took on a bit of stunned amusement as she chuckled in a deranged way. Lifting her right arm she activated her omnitool and a vid displaying what happened on Titan played. It was surreal to see myself from another perspective charging down that YMIR. I knew it was crazy, but from this angle it looked like I was suicidal. My heart skipped a beat as I saw just how close that missile had come to hitting me.

When it was finished she deactivated her omnitool and began ranting in an almost manic way, "Your actions today were an order of magnitude more than unsatisfactory, recruit. You were told to stick to the basics." As she leaned down to get in my face and snarl her

right hand came up to snatch my by the collar of my armor. Pulling me in closer, her voice was soft and mocking. Like she was begging me to do or say something to give her an excuse to pummel me. "My memory is fuzzy, recruit. At what point did I teach you that the basics include charging a down a YMIR with an SMG and deployable charge?"

Nervously I shook my head and stammered "You didn't, Drill Instructor."

She erupted in rage and slammed me back into the cold metal floor of the frigate, pinning me with her arm and leaning her weight into it. "That sort of shit does not happen under my command, recruit. You're lucky no one died with a stunt like that. This is not some fucking game you play where if you die you can respawn. Do you understand me, recruit?"

The anger and frustration coursing through my veins were spiking from the yelling and physical abuse, and it took everything I had not to let my inner rage monster take a swing with one big biotic fueled punch. I knew I screwed up but I was not going to let her break me. My reply was curt, dripping with loathing and disrespect "Yes, Drill Instructor."

Releasing her hold on me, DI Ellison stood and gave back just as good as she got from me, "Oh I don't think you do! Tell me recruit, what the fuck was rattling around in that empty cavity of yours you call a head to even contemplate doing something that stupid?"

I sat up and put my arms around my knees, no longer able to feel how exhausted, sore or hungry I was. All I could feel was blinding rage that wanted to lash out. Without looking up to address her I answered "We had exhausted missiles, Drill Instructor."

Ellison continued with her pacing from earlier, back to examining me and shaking her head in disgust, "So because of your trigger happy fuck up, squad leader, you decided the best course of action was do something even vorchas are not crazy enough to attempt? Absolutely brilliant. Tell me again why I shouldn't fail your ass and have you repeat MVC?"

The spike of rage cooled at her words. The way she laid out so perfectly how my earlier decisions had led to the event in question stopped me cold. I could feel shame rushing in to replace the anger, renewing all the aches and pains in my body. I couldn't lift my head from staring at the metal plate floor beneath my feet, partly because I was too exhausted and partly because I was afraid I might begin crying.

The silence in the room stretched on as I failed to answer her question, too lost in my own mind. I kept remembering all the stupid choices I made, how I thought I was being clever or creative. Maybe this wasn't for me. Maybe I wasn't cut out to be in the UNSC.

DI Ellison decided she had let me stew in my own morbid thoughts long enough. Her tone was softer now, but no less commanding. "Good. You've at least learned to not lie to me. That's a start. I'm not going to fail you. You've got plenty of talent, but you had better get your shit in order real fast. You're headed to the big leagues after this. UNSC Marine Corps. You pull something like that out in the real world and they'll be sending condolences to more than just

your family members. Do I make myself clear, recruit?"

I nodded, relieved that I wasn't going to be failed, but still wracked with guilt and remorse over my actions. Swallowing around the lump in my throat I nodded and did my best to sound thankful, "Yes, Drill Instructor."

Sighing and shaking her head at me, DI Ellison continued. "On your feet, recruit." Gingerly raising myself from the floor, I did my best to have an erect posture but the day's exertion left me weak in the knees and a bit light headed. Giving me a once over, she said "I read your file, recruit. Including the stuff Master Sergeant Yilmaz added. I agree with his assessment. You're not ready. Not by a longshot."

Caring about what was in that file was the least of my worries at the moment. I simply nodded and tried to keep myself from fainting.

Stepping closer she dropped her voice into something more informal than I had ever heard from her before. "I don't know what your malfunction is recruit. I don't know if you've got some death wish because of Mindoir or what. But this ends now. We never leave someone behind on the field of battle and we never put them in harms way unless necessary. Just because this job involves combat does not mean the lives of those in uniform are expendable. You want to end your own life? Fine. Do it on your own time once you've left the service. Until then the UNSC is going to get eight solid years of service out of you. You owe that much to the brothers and sisters beside you, in front of you, behind you. You do not ever let them down like that again. "

I frowned at her mention of Mindoir, remembering how the YMIR invoked the memories of that day. I'd never have thought of myself as suicidal, but then again I'd never have thought of myself charging down a YMIR either. Maybe there was some truth to what she was saying about me.

"Dismissed, recruit." I blinked at her command, clearing my thoughts. Not wanting to piss her off again I nodded and moved as quickly as my weakened body would let me towards the door. My mind began yearning for the sleep and food I would find once I reached the cargo bay. The door detected my presence and opened automatically but before I could step through DI Ellison called me back. "Recruit Shepard."

Damn it. I had almost made it to the hallway and freedom. My shoulders sagging, I looked back over my shoulder and made eye contact with her. She stood with her arms folded but seemed to be curious about something. "What would you have done if that didn't work?"

Seriously? Bewildered at her question and too exhausted to even try to come up with an excuse I answered honestly. "I don't know, Drill Instructor. I hadn't planned it out."

She stared at me expressionlessly for a moment before looking to the ceiling and shaking her head in exasperation, "I figured as much. Guess I should be thankful you weren't a coward on top of it all and sent someone else to do the hard part." She nodded towards the hallway as a gesture of dismissal, "I'm not sure if you're secretly

brilliant or impressively stupid, recruit. Probably a mix of both."

I nodded and stepped out into the hallway. Turning to walk down the hallway I saw a naval crewman walking my way. She took one look at my battered appearance and gave me a tight sympathetic smile. I tried to smile back but it came out as more like a grimace which I'm sure made her think I was deranged.

We passed each other and I rubbed the back of my neck, trying to ease the soreness of having worn my helmet for so long. A few steps more and I could have sworn the crewman spoke, only it was in my mother's voice.

"_Don't you want to be something more than just a farmer on Mindoir?_"

"What?" I turned to look at the crewman, perplexed that she sounded like my mother or knew anything about me.

The crewman looked over her shoulder and frowned at me, her voice completely different this time "I didn't say anything."

We held eye contact for a moment longer, the crewman giving me the impression she thought I was out of my mind. She shook her head and continued on, occasionally looking back over her shoulder as I stood there in a daze, watching her.

Finally snapping out of it, I realized I must be more stressed and exhausted than I had originally thought. Now I was hearing my mother's voice. I rubbed the back of my neck again and fingered the bioamp port only to coming to a chilling halt. My mind for some reason recalled the fact that the L2 amps were known to cause all sorts of problems, including hallucinations. The L3's were supposed to be free of those side effects, but... they had originally said the L2's were safe for use, too.

Feeling even more depressed and weary, I trudged my way back towards the cargo bay, unsure if I could get any sleep now that I was worried about losing my mind.

* * *

><p>Rakesh Sharma Geosynchronous Orbital Station, Earth, Sol System, Orior Cluster; December 7th, 2572 [Standardized Terran Calendar], 1033 [Local Time, Terran Standard]

"_Spaceways Flight 2263 to Illium in the Crescent Nebula is now boarding at gates 44 through 46, decks 2 and 3. Will an Ellen Ripley please report to customer service kiosk 12 on deck 5 and claim her orange tabby cat Jonesy? This has been a public service announcement from the Rakesh Sharma Orbital Station coordination VI. We ask that you refrain from smoking, running hacking software or operating personal drones while aboard this station. If you require assistance please find one of our conveniently located kiosks and ask our friendly and helpful VI, Saraswati. Thank you for your cooperation and we hope you enjoy, or have enjoyed, your stay on Earth._"

"Who do I complain to if I didn't enjoy my stay on Earth?"

Our table erupted into chuckles at Kekoa's remark. The time we spent in MVC was definitely memorable for the wrong reasons.

We were occupying a large corner booth in a diner aboard the station, enjoying a real meal while we waited for our flights to be called. It feels like it had been ages since I'd eaten something that didn't come in a wrapper or carton. After graduating from MVC the day before we spent the night partying it up in Omsk. Well, we had tried our best to party it up. I'd barely drank as I just couldn't bring myself to voluntarily get drunk. Not after what I'd seen it do to my father.

"So what ever happened with that girl you were talking to, Luis?" Shih's innocent question caused me to pause, the forkful of Polow halfway to my mouth. I vividly recalled how I my awkward attempt to chat up one of the local ladies, a cute blonde, had turned into a disaster.

Galen smirked and answered before I could, "She threw a drink in his face."

"Please tell me you got that on vid." Kuang eagerly pleaded with Galen.

I scowled at Galen, really hoping he'd shut his mouth but he began dissolving into chuckles at my discomfort that soon spread to the rest of the table. My pride stung as I also recalled how I'd been set up. "Anna sent me some bogus pick up lines in Russian."

Nearly sliding out of his seat from the side splitting laughing fit, Galen managed to choke out his incredulity "And you believed her? What a fucking moron."

Okay. Maybe he had a point there. I sighed and appreciated the self deprecating nature of the situation. "I know. Something told me she wasn't being honest but..." I had to pause and catch myself. I was about to delve too deep into that conversation, which was already pretty weird. Playing it off I smiled and shrugged, "I should have known better. She was always finding ways to tease me back on Reach."

The squad's laughter subsided into deep breaths and sighs. A calm of quiet eating resumed around the table until Finch finished chewing and decided to pick away that the topic of my spectacular failure last night. "Is that the same one that sent you the bikini holo?"

Galen stopping chewing and quickly stared at me, his eyes wide and amused at this new bit of information. Before he, or anyone else, could comment I quickly explained why that happened. Or at least what I hoped had been the reason she'd sent it. "She's was teasing me about being stationed on Proteus for training while we're stuck in one of the coldest parts of Earth."

Donat shook his head and went back to his meal, talking around a mouthful of gazpacho "I wish people would tease me like that."

I frowned into my plate, feeling oddly protective of Anna. I didn't like the fact something so private had been disclosed and I raised my eyes to glare at Finch. He might have made huge strides to be less of

an asshole, but that still left him being enough of one to talk about someone's private matters.

"No kidding? That's cool." Galen seemed to be genuinely impressed about Anna being stationed on Proteus. Or so I thought. He nonchalantly resumed eating his meal and slyly asked the question I dreaded. "She never sent me any pics of her in a bikini. Is there something going on there?"

Grunting in annoyance I dropped my fork forcefully onto my plate and glared at him, "Fuck off."

Not missing a beat, Shih cocked her head to the side and mocked me. "Well after you struck out last night looks like you're going to have to fuck yourself instead." She grinned wide and continued, "Or maybe get your girlfriend to send you vid or do simulstim with you this time."

"She's not my girlfriend." I was really starting to get annoyed with the current topic. I knew everyone was just having a little fun at my expense but I simply did not like the fact they were dragging Anna into this too. It was one thing to give me a hard time, but completely different to talk about someone that wasn't here, or that any of them except for Galen even knew.

"Will all of you shut the fuck up?" Barrera grumbled from the edge of the booth, her head laid back and eyes closed. She'd been the one to get the most hammered last night but we'd all taken detox medication this morning before we collected our bags. The last thing we wanted was to be drunk or hungover when we boarded the space tether elevator. We'd seen enough vomiting entering and exiting orbit to last a lifetime, thank you kindly.

Azevedo, seated beside Barrera, frowned and leaned over to check our squadmate out. "You don't look so good. Didn't you take your detox?"

Giving Griz a glance I had to agree. She looked liked death warmed over. Which was about what you could expect from someone who downed as much alcohol as she did last night. I doubt just one dose was going to completely detox her system.

Barrera grunted and replied "Yeah, but I think I ate too fast. My stomach is feeling nauseous."

Azevedo recoiled in horror, bumping into Donat beside her. She pointed a finger accusingly at Barrera and warned her "Do not puke on me. I made it this far without any of you doing it and you're not going to get me now."

Barrera cracked a wan grin, slowly sliding herself to slump against Azevedo, who shrieked and shoved Barrera with enough force to knock her out of the booth and onto the floor. The entire squad laughed heartily again as Barrera stood, rubbing her tailbone and smiling at Azevedo "So I guess you're not the cuddling type?"

Once the laughter died down there was yet again another moment of silence, this time more solemn as the idea of us all heading our separate ways sunk in. Donat voiced the mood at the table, "So are any of you excited to be headed to your duty station?"

Galen voiced his displeasure with a snarl, "No. I got Fortieth Colonial on Terror Nova."

Our resident native Terra Novian, Shih, glared at Galen and gently reprimanded him, "It's not that bad, Kemp."

"Sure. Because it's not like I'm going to be on permanent Innie hunting patrol there." Galen sardonically dismissed her comments, going back to eating his gyoza. I noted Galen's sullen change in mood and remembered his largest desire in joining the UNSC Army. Getting off the Citadel and onto a real human world. Guess he never figured he'd wind up on the colony most associated with insurrections.

"I got Fifty Fifth Frontier in Argos." Azevedo grinned my way. Not understanding what she meant by that I frowned and she clarified, "Already found out I'm going to the detachment on Mindoir."

Well. That certainly explained her grin. Who would have figured?

Yeah? Who would have figured that the Systems Alliance still hadn't coughed up the credits to allow the UNSC to expand and defend Mindoir with more than detachments? Guess a few thousand colonists being dead or enslaved was bad enough to call press conferences and have politically convenient moments of silence, but when it came to actually doing something about it the politicians back on Arcturus were still the same old craven and self serving lot they always have been.

Clearing my head of dark thoughts I smiled back at Azevedo, "You're gonna love it there. Temperature's a little on the warm side but it's tolerable. But the food..." Even having gorged myself this morning and last night on real food I still could feel my mouth beginning to salivate thinking about home. My real home. "Fresh food all year long. Nothing frozen, dehydrated or processed."

Her eyes glazed over and her grin widened thinking about the smorgasbord awaiting her on Mindoir. Clearing her head with a shake she refocused and chuckled, slapping her stomach "I'm already betting I'm gonna have trouble meeting my weight limit."

"It's gonna be nothing but processed stuff for me. I got Fifty Third Frontier out of Anath in Beidha." We all winced at Kekoa's luck. He nodded grimly and shook his head, "Yep, fucking Petra Nebula. Hegemony watchmen." There was only Elysium in the Vetus system in that cluster. Primarily because humanity had never found anything else worthwhile, but after the Contact War we realized that the cluster was dangerously close to Hegemony space. Only a thousand or two light years, and after the Skyllian Onslaught everyone considered it a waste of credits and time to explore and invest there. Now that the Hegemony and their Terminus proxies were probing the edges of Systems Alliance space again it was only a matter of time before another major outbreak of fighting occurred. As if Mindoir wasn't enough.

"Oh yeah? I got you beat." A collective of groans and mumbling accompanied Finch's usual need to have it tougher. He'd done a remarkably good job this last week of not antagonizing everyone, even going as far as to be friendly and helpful. But you didn't change

your ways overnight.

I could see everyone already ignoring whatever he would have to say, and worse I could see Finch knew it, the hesitance and embarrassment evident on his face. Never one to back down from a confrontation, Galen gave Finch a cold stare and drawled "Here we go."

Even if MVC was over and there was no official squad for me to lead I knew it was my responsibility to reign this situation in. Finch needed to hold on to this progress so he'd be able to fit in with his new unit and the rest of us didn't need our last memory of MVC being a fight inside a diner aboard an orbital station. Giving Galen a stern glance and swift kick under the table I set the tone for everyone "Let the man speak."

Galen looked back at me, astonished that I not only defended Finch but that I had kicked him in doing so. The rest of the table was equally stunned, wondering what had happened to have me backing Finch but I held my ground, slowly staring back at everyone present. When no one dared to speak out or make a comment I nodded to Finch to continue. Finch looked a little uneasy, and completely out of character, "I, uh, got Seventy Fourth Frontier. Out on Franklin."

Everyone winced and sucked in a breath at his announcement. Well, it was bound to happen eventually. Finch clearly had the worst claim out of us all. Man, what an unlucky guy. Terminus duty? He'd be lucky if he got any downtime.

"Fuck, man. Terminus? Talk about a shit assignment." Vercesi was the first to voice what we were all thinking.

Finch looked oddly flustered at the sympathy he was getting, but shrugged and pushed ziti around his plate. His attempt to act nonchalant fooled no one but I had to admit it was kind of neat to see him actually relating to the squad, even if it was only a few hours before we separated for good.

Barrera grinned from her laid back position, mocking the rest of us. "I can honestly say I don't feel the least bit bad about the rest of you suffering while I head to OCS on Luna. Better get used to the idea of saluting me, punks."

"Yeah I'm never doing that." Shih frowned petulantly at Barrera, who waggled her eyebrows back at her.

"I got to stay in cluster, too. Thirty Fourth Frontier out of Shamash." Donat chimed in with his own good luck. Shamash might not have anything in system beside a naval depot but it was within forty eight hours away from Earth or Reach. Plus there was nothing really to do patrolling the Orior. No one besides the Covenant was crazy enough to try and attack.

Kuang raised his glass in a salute to Kekoa and commiserated "I got stuck with Fifty Seventh Frontier out of Shango in Oyo."

Kekoa raised his glass to return the salute, "Looks like you get Hegemony watch duty, too."

"Forty Second Colonial here. Shanxi. Joy." Shih's petulance

continued. "I'll get to help round up drunken Terra Firma convention attendees once they've finished rioting every year."

Vercesi, still the ardent Terra Firma supporter and Shanxi native, sent a withering glare her direction. Losing the scowl he addressed the table at large, "I wish I got that assignment. Instead I got Sixty First Colonial out on Bekenstein." Sighing at his lot in life he lamented, "I'm not getting laid unless I blow my monthly pay."

More, actually. The times I'd gone shopping in Milgrom with my grandparents had left me traumatized. There wasn't a single thing on that entire planet that wasn't overpriced.

Elbowing him and smiling, Kuang mocked his teammate "Well look at it this way. You weren't getting laid anyways. Have you seen your face?"

Vercesi calmly reached out and slapped Kuang upside with enough force to create a loud smack that drew the attention of other patrons. We began laughing at Kuang's nonplussed expression until the manager of the diner passed by and glared at us. Behaving like like children we snickered and made faces at the manager's back the second she walked away.

Once she was out of earshot Finch returned to the topic at hand, giving Kekoa a look of jealous loathing, "I still can't believe that out of all of us you're the only one that scored last night."

Kekoa puffed his chest out, giving us all a cheesy smile "Well I am the best looking one in the squad."

I snatched an ice cube out of my drink and threw it at his head, and soon the others followed suit. Kekoa covered his head and chuckled, still mocking us "Don't hate me because I'm beautiful."

"The only way you're the best looking person in the squad is you get assigned to a Turian unit. And even then it's not guaranteed." Galen's remark and Kekoa's insulted frown set off another round of raucous laughter. Enough that the manager returned, this time stopping to glare with her hand on her hips.

We tried to hide our mirth but after facing down DI Ellison for months this poor woman wasn't intimidating anyone at the table. Realizing she wasn't having the effect she desired made her sigh and walk away again, to more childish jeers behind her back.

Carrying on where he left off, Kekoa continued to boast over his success last night, "You're all just jealous. Everyone loves a man like me in uniform." He grinned lasciviously and added "And that guy last night was really gifted. Talented. He had the bi-"

"I'm really happy for you but I'm trying to eat here." Azevedo broke into his bragging session with a disgusted glare.

"Who said you were the only one that got laid last night?" Barrera added, lifting her head to grin.

Donat frowned at her, trying to remember events last night and coming up with nothing. "Wait, Shih had to take you back to the barracks

because you were so wasted. You didn't leave with anyone."

Barrera's grin grew wider at his remark and I frowned alongside everyone else. Slowly it dawned on me what she was hinting at and I wasn't the only one. We all looked back at Shih who was glaring daggers at Barrera and then became engrossed in her meal, unwilling to raise her eyes to meet anyone.

Huh. Well, uh, good for them. Although Galen looked a bit conflicted. I silently looked between him and Shih, realizing his joking flirtations with her were not as harmless as I had originally thought. Unfortunately it looks like he never stood a chance.

"What about you, lady killer?" I frowned at Kuang's comment, not sure what he meant by it but sure it was directed at me.

"What about me?" My answer was tinged with a hint of steel, not wanting to restart the topic of Anna's now infamous bikini holo

"Uh, where are you headed?" He was a bit put off by the way I had answered, giving me a wary look.

"Oh. Thirty Fifth Frontier. Arcturus patrol out of Czarnobog." I sheepishly replied, a bit ashamed with the way I had spoken to him.

"_Spaceways Flight 5002 to Arcturus Station and Amaterasu in the Arcturus Stream is now boarding at gates 19 through 21, decks 2 and 3._"

And there was my ride. I'd be traveling to the Izanagi system and then taking a military transport to Czarnobog.

Sliding out of the booth I grabbed my small carry on bag, having already checked in my duffel and bag from Bekenstein. I stood and awkwardly looked back at the rest, who all had crestfallen faces. "Well, I guess this is it."

Barrera stood and wrapped me in a hug, which surprised me, before backing off and giving me a huge smile, "Try not to get into fist fights with anymore mechs out there, okay?"

The squad chuckled at her remark and I rolled my eyes. I'm never going to live that down.

One by one the squad came up and gave me handshakes and another hug in Shih's case. We had already exchanged omnitool addresses last night so the only thing left to do was leave.

Galen stood off to the side and tilted his head towards the loading zone "I'll walk you to the gate."

"Uh oh. They need some privacy for their goodbye." Vercesi mocked. I flipped him off with both hands and he blew me a kiss in return.

Waving to the rest I turned to walk away but Finch reached out and grabbed my arm. I looked at him over my shoulder and he leaned in, nervous and earnest in his whispering, "Hey, I just want to say thanks. You know. For everything."

I nodded slowly, glad that Finch was making the effort. He released my arm, acting more macho to make up for his moment of weakness and said loudly, "We're going to have to get back together again somewhere. Really party and run wild for the night."

Grinning back I enthusiastically nodded, looking back at the whole squad. "No doubt. All of us. We'll do it one day."

The squad cheered, fists in the air and roaring loudly, causing a scene in the diner. The manager glared at me specifically this time from behind the counter, and I ducked my head, quickly walking out of the restaurant before she decided to call security.

Once outside Galen and I bobbed and weaved through the crowds aboard the station, headed towards gates for my flight in silence. Reaching the first gate, we stopped and looked at each other. This had been a long and strange trip with the most unlikely person ever. Who would have thought that the same guy that I kicked out of my room on the Citadel would wind up being one of my best friends?

Galen looked at the lines, a melancholy air to him. His hands shoved into the pockets of his MCU's, he glanced back at me and seemed to be thinking the same thing I had been, "I thought you were an asshole that night."

I chuckled and nodded, remembering MEPS, Auggie, Ilyse, and everything else from that day clearly, "Well I knew you were an asshole."

He laughed, shaking his head, before ending in a sigh and more silence. After a moment he quipped back, "Still not as big an asshole as your roommate."

I grunted and rolled my eyes at that one. The silence was back again and this time I decided to confront it with some humor. "If you want me to kiss you then you're going to have to make the first move."

Not missing a beat he replied, "Nope. Your streak of not getting any action is staying intact."

Glaring back at him I reflexively defended my honor, "Just for clarification that streak was broken a while back."

He stared at me in shock, his eyes slowly narrowing. "I was only joking before, but did something actually happen between you and Anna?"

My eyes widened, annoyed and flustered. "No. Back at MEPS."

"Anna wasn't at MEPS." His reply was confused.

"No shit. Ilyse was."

Galen's eyes crossed as he tried to recall the name, "Ilyse. Ilyse. Nope. Don't know who that is."

"The redhead?" I tried jogging his memory.

His eyes widened in recognition and astonishment. "Really? You and her?"

I shrugged, not keen on explaining the details, "She kinda found out I was a biotic half way through. Didn't turn out well after that."

Galen winced in sympathy, giving me a mockingly consoling pat on the back. "Well she just didn't realize you'd turn out to be some YMIR killing machine."

I shook my head, lamenting everything about this conversation but still finding humor in it. "Maybe I should have used that as a pick up line last night."

"Couldn't have been worse than the lines Anna gave you. Speaking of which, what are you going to do about that?"

I frowned, not sure what he meant. There were several options floating around in my mind since this morning. The most appealing, and childish, was digitizing her face onto a krogan body and then posting that on the extranet. "What do you mean?"

Galen looked at me oddly, like I was a bit slow. "About her sending you bikini holos and making sure you don't get lucky with women that are not her. She likes you man."

Snorting at his assumption I laid out the counter argument, "Or she's flirtatious and likes playing pranks. Maybe she thinks of me as a friend or a cousin."

He shook his head and sighed "I don't have any family, but if one of them was sending me holos of her in a bikini and sabotaging my chances with women I'd think something was wrong."

Staring at him I contemplated how my own sisters would do just that. Fiendish little imps. "Clearly you've never met my sisters."

Galen tilted his head and quirked his lips, agreeing with my comment, which should have been a warning. "No, I haven't. But let me tell you. Your older sister? Smoking hot. Do you have any other bikini holos of her?"

"Don't make me kill you, Kemp."

He put some distance between us and faux pleaded his case. "What? I'm just saying. Maybe we hit it off and you and I become brothers. One big happy family."

I stared at Galen in sympathy, knowing he didn't realize what he was asking for. "No one ever deserves that punishment. Not even you."

He frowned, somewhat curious, "That bad, huh?"

Nodding I confirmed his suspicions, "That bad."

He looked conflicted, thinking to himself before smiling, "Yeah but that smile is totally worth it. And those eyes. And those legs. And that rack." My snarl increased with each word he said until he got the hint and stepped out of my range. "You're right. Not worth

it."

Knowing he'd only been saying those things to wind me up I sighed and shook my head. As annoying as he could be at times I was really going to miss Galen. And who knows? Maybe one day I'll introduce him to Lizzy just so I can watch her tear him apart verbally.

Sensing it was time for me to go, Galen stuck out his right hand and smiled, "I'm still not kissing you. You'll have settle for a handshake and hug."

Making a puppy dog face I pleaded, "Not even a little one?"

"No."

"Please?"

"No."

"Just a peck?"

"You can kiss my ass."

I chuckled and grabbed his hand, pulling him in for an embrace. "Going to miss you, C-Urchin."

He nodded and replied, "You too, Elvis. Remember we're still going to hit up the Citadel one day. Just me and you. We'll end the night wasted in Chora's Den. The Wards will never be the same again."

We separated and I raised an eyebrow skeptically, "Do I even want to know what Chora's Den is?"

Galen nodded enthusiastically, a wide grin on his face. "Your life will never be the same after you visit."

My other eyebrow joined the first as my skeptical frown became more terrified than doubtful. "That still doesn't answer my question."

"Trust me."

I shook my head, not willing to go that far. "Now I'm definitely not going there with you."

He laughed and raised his fist which I bumped one last time. Giving him a wave, I grabbed my bags and headed towards the line for Gate 19.

Getting in line I stood behind an Asari couple who stuck out like a pair of blue thumbs. One of them noticed me in my uniform and smiled, "UNSC? It's always so good to know we have more than the Turians protecting Citadel space now."

Her friend nodded and condescendingly added, "Yes. We've just finished visiting your planet. Those giant sand blocks you stacked out in that desert are.. cute."

Giving her a cold stare I contemplated if I should mention that I had

nothing to do with stacking sand blocks in the desert, but thought better of it. This asari obviously had a low opinion of humans and there was nothing I could do or say to change or her mind, let alone even make her feel ashamed.

The more courteous asari looked mortified and apologized for her friend's rudeness, "Oh you'll have to forgive Kelra. She's never been one for ancient history and learning about the way others live. I, on the other hand, had a wonderful time here. There's culture and history everywhere you see here. We even saw that giant wall your kind built ages ago. Amazing that it's held up so well over the ages."

"Oh I wouldn't say I completely disregard ancient history. I did enjoy the trip to the landmarks for the war your kind had." The snarkier of the pair tapped her finger to her lips as she tried to recall some bit of information, "Interplanetary War I think it was? Is that what the mass grave sites are for?"

My good mood from having said my farewells to Galen and the squad long gone, I glared at the asari and grunted. I didn't care if she took that to mean yes, no or go fuck yourself.

Thankfully they were the next in line to board, and turned to have their tags and omnitools scanned for boarding passes. The Air Force Security Team at the gate acknowledged them and they moved beyond the gate and into the umbilical that connected to the transport ship.

Stepping up to the scanning and decontamination chamber next, I was met by a small group of Air Force guards who gestured for me to put my bags down. As the doors closed the supervisor gave me a once over through the clear walls of the chamber and then glanced at a datapad in his hands. Looking back up he addressed me, "Private Second Grade Luis Shepard? UNSC Marines? Biotic?"

I nodded and quickly glanced at the rank along the left breast of his armor chestplate, "Yes, Chief Petty Officer."

He nodded and rechecked my itinerary, "Headed to Amaterasu and then Czarnobog?"

Again I nodded and gave the standard military reply, "Yes, Chief Petty Officer."

The guard at the terminal finished his scan and looked over his shoulder at his superior, "He's clean."

The CPO nodded and gave me a grin, "Anything else, Private?"

Feeling a bit annoyed still with that asari I grabbed my bags and asked, "Do I have to sit or sleep anywhere near either of the two just before me?"

The security team laughed and waved me through. I passed through the scanning and decontamination gate into the umbilical, the temperature dropping significantly. After a brisk, and chilly, walk I reached the transport. A flight attendant greeted me, datapad in hand and a large smile on his face. "Humanity's finest, eh? Welcome aboard Spaceways, Private Shepard. You've been assigned to cabin one one seven

planetside on deck two. Sleeping bays are to the rear of your assigned deck and yours personal bay is one one seven dash four. Complimentary meals will be served in four hours but the cafeteria is open at all times for a la carte service for a small fee. If you have any questions or complaints, please consult our hospitality VI or message the staff at this address."

My omnitool pinged as the staff address for the transport was added. Adjusting the bag over my shoulder, I nodded and moved along, passing through a lounge area for passengers and then into the cabins. Since I was down another deck, I found the elevator bank and stood by with several other passengers for the next car.

Once through that hassle I exited on my deck and began looking around. One one seven planetside. One one one seven planetside. Not seeing a cabin even remotely in range of my number I got the idea I was supposed to move further back.

Finally reaching my cabin I could see from the outside that I was going to be sharing the trip with a young family complete with two small children. Two small children who were yelling and screaming and jumping around the cabin while their parents looked like they had given up trying to reign them in. The mother glanced at me through the glass of the doorway and gave me a look that clearly said to save myself.

I opted to follow her advice and headed towards the sleeping bays. I'm pretty sure there might be some level of cowardice in my self preservation, but I wasn't about to give myself a hard time over it.

When I finally arrived my body was starting to feel the effects of exhaustion and stuffing my face. I just wanted to crawl into my little vacuum sealed cubbyhole and knock out for the entire trip.

Finding my bay, I climbed up to the appropriate level and slid into the small sleeping quarters with my bags. Pulling the lid closed, it sealed with a hiss, protecting me should the pilots decide to do something stupid and suffer a hull breach.

A small light activated inside the bay once the door closed, illuminating everything in pale blue. "VI lights off. VI inform me when we enter the Arcturus system."

"_Request acknowledged. Shepard, Luis Vincent. Sleep bay two dash one one seven dash four. Wake up conditions set for arrival in Arcturus system. Confirm?"_

"Confirmed"

"_Request confirmed. Thank you for choosing Spaceways."_

As the lights in my sleep bay dimmed I settled in and closed my eyes with a big yawn.

Of course after being so tired, in perfect darkness, and the bay comfortable the last thing my body seemed to want to do was sleep. I tried rolling over to get into a better position but nothing helped.

Sighing to myself in frustration I reached into my left pocket and withdrew my wireless ear buds. Popping them in, I activated my omnitool and selected some classical music to put me to sleep.

Of course once I finally began dozing off, the flight crew's announcement overrode even my omnitool's privacy settings. Stupid safety protocols.

"_This is your captain speaking. Spaceways Flight 5002 is now undocking from the Rakesh Sharma GSO Station. Please return to your assigned cabin or sleeping bay until we have cleared orbit. We're expecting about just under a six hour trip to the Charon Relay. Currently we are fortieth in line to use the Relay and shouldn't have to wait very long once we reach Pluto's orbit. Interstellar prices for extranet connections will be in place once we enter the relay. The entertainment lounge will begin a complimentary simulstim screening of Blasto: The Vol Supremacy in just over one hour. Feel free to access our complimentary media library for your private entertainment and educational needs. And as with all Spaceways flights, we ask that you refrain from explicit or erotic simulstims unless you are in the privacy of your own sleeping bay. If you have any further questions, please direct them towards our hospitality VI or send a message to the crew."_

The classical music faded back in while I growled at the annoying interruption to my attempt to sleep.

And of course just as I was dozing off again my omnitool pinged to notify me of an incoming message.

[\ Anna S Vasilyeva [A] Yeka RF Earth [to] Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein \]

[\ You told everyone about that holo!? \]

I frowned, not at all expecting this message, but I should have. I have little doubt the moment I boarded this transport Galen sent Anna some manner of smart ass message requesting his own bikini holo.

Thanks a lot, asshole.

[\ Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein [to] Anna S Vasilyeva [A] Yeka RF Earth \]

[\ No. Someone else saw it that day you sent it. I said nothing and showed nothing. \]

Too annoyed to go back to sleep I began searching through my address book to find Galen so I could thank him when I ran across Wajiha's name. Wow. That seemed so long ago. Still pretty pathetic that I had yet to delete her address after everything that had happened. Then again she was the first girl to ever show interest in me so maybe I was subconsciously unwilling to let go of that? No matter how bad it had turned out to be?

Well, that wasn't really true either, was it? I think Klara Palinkas was into me, but I was just too shy and scared to talk to her. I wonder whatever happened to her? In the depressing whirlwind of

events after the raid I never really found out who had survived. Was she dead? Or enslaved?

The thought enraged me, gnawing at my consciousness to find out. I quickly access the extranet and did a search for Klara Palinkas, and half a minute later I got a hit for someone living on Benning. That couldn't be her, could it? She was from Mindoir, not Benning.

I mentally chastised myself. I'm from Mindoir too but wound up on Bekenstein. Everyone on Mindoir were colonists or the children of colonists. Maybe she returned to live with relatives like I had?

Bringing up the profile I was stunned to see her again. Same black hair. Same blue eyes. Same beautiful smile.

I quickly typed out a message before I could second guess myself.

```
**[ \ Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein [to] Klara T Palinkas [A]
Joug Benning \]**
```

```
[ \ You probably don't remember who I am but we used to live on
Mindoir in Nouveau Basel. I just looked you up and am relieved to
know you survived the raid. \]
```

I stared at my message for close to a minute, fearful it sounded creepy or desperate. Throwing caution to the wind I hit the send function and sighed. Reviewing the message over and over in my head, I kept wondering if she would answer.

Maybe by reminding her about Mindoir you're going to make her depressed?

Ugh. I probably should have just said something like 'Hi. Remember me?'

Yeah. Because that didn't sound creepy when someone just messages at random.

Anna had yet to reply and I doubted Klara would anytime soon so I deactivated my omnitool and closed my eyes. Finally, my body felt ready to sleep.

But it was not meant to be. My omnitool pinged yet again, and this time I sighed, partly in frustration and partly in anticipation.

Opening the message, I was elated to see who it was.

```
[ \ **Klara T Palinkas [A] Joug Benning [A] Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg
Bekenstein **\]
```

```
[ \ You're alive! Oh wow. This is amazing! Can you vid chat? Right
now? \]
```

Bathed in the pale orange glow of my omnitool, I grinned. My body was invigorated and sleep was suddenly the last thing on my mind.

Could I? You bet I could, Klara.

* * *

><p>Codex Entry: M37 Falcon Multi Purpose Grenade Launcher

The UNSC M37 Multi Purpose Grenade Launcher [MPGL] is a semiautomatic tactical support weapon used for firing an assortment of micro grenades. It has the distinction of being one of a handful of primary weapon systems issued to troops that is not produced by Misriah Armory. Weapon Systems Technologies [WST], the oft maligned manufacturer of controversial weapons, is the architect behind the Falcon. The M37, introduced in [Terran Translation: 2515 CE, Terran Calendar], is an updated model of successful mass accelerator munitions launchers first introduced in [Terran Translation: 2397 CE, Terran Calendar].

The Falcon is heavy and streamlined, with a low profile body coated in black polymer and dark gray ceramic accents for insulation, ruggedness and grip. The upper portion houses both the unique UNSC VI integration electronics suite and an internal tubular [6] capacity magazine fed through a dorsal opening. The lower portion features a thick grip with thumbhole and wide flat trigger guard. The ventral surface of the barrel has a short modular rail for limited attachments. Weapon, warhead, and target status can be linked and displayed via the HUD in armor and headgear suites. Additionally the weapon can produce an unobtrusive tactical holographic display to either side of the electronics suite showing simple readouts as well as pop up sights along the dorsal surface for manual aiming.

The M37 fires [Terran Translation: 25mm] micro grenades at a much slower velocity and reduced range than other conventional micro scale mass accelerators. This is due to balancing the requirements for the mass of the projectiles against the heat and recoil generated in firing. As a consequence the M37 is meant to be a squad or fire team support weapon for use against heavily armored enemies or those in defilade. Rate of fire is quite quick for a semiautomatic munitions launcher and the heat management allows for all [6] rounds to be launched before overheat. The rounds are electronically synced with the VI integration electronics suite which optimizes detonation as an airburst, impact, or user controlled delay depending upon the type of micro grenades used and current battlefield. These rounds also have limited target tracking ability and movement capability by releasing of chemical propellant to correct course or bounce into place. As the Falcon uses a standard size widely accepted for micro grenades, a diverse and even illegal variety of options exist, including: Standard fragmentation; Anti armor high explosive; Plasma based incendiary; Lowered mass effect field; Non lethal electrical arc; Super cooled cryo; Flechette canister; Species specific riot control gas; Offensive nanites; And confined quarters thermobaric.

The simplicity and reliability of the weapon leaves little room for criticisms beyond the obvious that it is not a primary assault weapon. Aside from the tremendous recoil and low ammo count, a major drawback is the usefulness of the weapon is entirely dependent upon if the choice in micro grenade warheads are appropriate for the situation. The small nature of these individual warheads allows designated heavy weapons specialists in the UNSC to carry several dozen but even this amount can be exhausted quite quickly. To remedy this WST has teamed up with Hahne Kedar Defense and Kassa Fabrication

to create a specialized field fabrication unit to create micro grenades. Each unit comes with a small supply of explosive composition which can be used to create a total of [24] fragmentation or high explosive warheads in [Terran Translation: 10 Terran minutes] at the cost of [1] standard unit of omnigel per warhead. While this does allow troops to continually create basic warheads in the field, it is still reliant upon power cells to run the fabricator, a large cache of omnigel, resupply of the explosive composition, and free time, none of which are guaranteed to be plentiful on a battlefield.

* * *

><p>Codex Entry: M41 Cobra Multi Environment Portable Anti Vehicle Missile System

The M41 Cobra Multi-Environment Portable Anti-Vehicle Missile System [MPAMS] is a missile launcher system used by UNSC forces to engage enemy terrestrial or aerial vehicles. In the aftermath of the liberation of Shanxi, Office of Naval Intelligence [ONI] analysts and engineers reviewed equipment taken from killed or captured Turian soldiers. Of prime interest were the light missile launchers carried by Turian forces responsible for reducing UNSC vehicles to scrap heaps by using a combination of mass effect fields and shaped explosive warheads. By the time of the ceasefire for [Terran Translation: First Contact War] in [Terran Translation: 2485 CE, Terran Calendar] ONI had a working prototype under the name Cobra. The project was then handed over to Misriah Armory for further refinement and finalization before mass production.

The Cobra is made of two components. The first is a reusable launch and targeting unit considered the M41 proper consisting of: Dual rotating gray ceramic barrels housing separate rail launch systems, element zero cores, and heat management systems; Central housing for munitions cartridges and a sensory array; Lower receiver coated in black polymer with an internal electronics suite, optional low profile holographic side display, trigger grips and firing mechanism; And a folding stock assembly with recoil dampening that allows for standard or over the shoulder firing. The second component is an expendable munitions cartridge containing two M19 Triple Warhead Anti Vehicle [TWAV] missiles and a power cell that is loaded into the central housing of the launcher assembly.

Small and light enough to be carried by an individual human soldier with no problem, the launcher is a dual barrel micro scale mass accelerator munitions launcher that uses the disposable power cell to power a cold firing of the missiles one at a time. When one missile is fired the barrels cycle places to allow for another firing. The cold firing gives more flexibility in firing locations without worry over backblast and dual barrels optimize the rapid firing of both missiles in a cartridge. An electronics suite is housed in the lower receiver and the sensory array made by Hahne Kedar Defense [HKD] resides atop the dorsal surface of the central housing. The internal VI is capable of tracking separate targets for each individual missile. The missile ignition activates [Terran Translation: 3 Terran Seconds] after launch and until that time functions more like a standard heavy mass projectile fired from a mass accelerator. The warheads are active the moment of launch and can detonate before the missile ignition begins, allowing troops to use the weapon at the closer ranges found in urban, arcology, and space station combat settings.

Each M19 TWAV missile is a triple warhead system that syncs and primes detonations at approximately [Terran Translation: 2 meters] from the target. The missiles have a high acceleration once missile ignition engages and a short operational range of [Terran Translation: 500 km]. A heat ablative ceramic coating acts as a limited countermeasure against laser defense systems. An electronic sync with the launcher system, operator HUD, or battle network telemetry provides confirmation and updated information for target lock, identification, and detonation. A redundant internal system within each missile is capable of a simpler targeting lock and proximity detonation calculation. The first warhead is an electromagnetic pulse warhead which is meant to disable countermeasure, communication, and propulsion systems in the target vehicle. The second warhead is a weak element zero warhead primed to create a rapid cycling mass effect field to defeat kinetic barriers by causing an unstable dark energy interaction detonation, or warp field if no barriers are present. Either instance would result in any outer reactive armor plating being defeated. The third and final warhead is a tandem high explosive shaped warhead which creates a pair of explosions that eject a stream of metal in a state of superplasticity. These attacks puncture the exposed layers of armor and cause internal destruction via spalling effect.

Since it's inception the M41 Cobra has seen extensive use on the battlefield, but despite this success and the best precautions the weapon is fallible with several notable weaknesses. The high explosive nature and close range firing capability creates a potential hazard in the hands of untrained or panicked soldiers. There are several documented incidents where a UNSC soldier miscalculated safe distance resulting in friendly casualties. Also, despite it's multi environment design, the missiles see limited effectiveness under harsh conditions and vacuum, and are still highly susceptible to laser based defenses. The weapon is also regarded as one dimensional in it's use as an anti vehicle platform. This is by design as the UNSC is of the opinion that the expensive and unrecoverable element zero warheads are unnecessary for engaging anti materiel and anti personnel objectives. As a result the Cobra's targeting VI and internal missile targeting systems will not recognize non vehicles or turrets as viable targets and thus fail to track or detonate properly. Finally, while the amount of element zero in each warhead is decidedly miniscule it is still considered a potential element zero hazard and is to be treated as such.

* * *

><p>Codex Entry: RP34 YMIR HeavyBiped Mech**

The Jotun Heavy Industries [JHI] RP34 YMIR is a flexible and variable series of heavy robotic platforms meant for security and combat duties. Created in [Terran Translation: 2532 CE, Terran Calendar] the YMIR quickly saw widespread use across Systems Alliance space augmenting colonial police forces under a program run by the Systems Alliance Colonial Administration Authority [CAA] for better security options to reassure investment groups. After great success in implementing the mechs by law enforcement agencies the Systems Alliance expanded the program via subsidies and tax credits to corporations and collectives with strategic value to the defense and economy of Systems Alliance space. The UNSC was then prompted to open a research project to create a heavier armed and armored model for

augmenting security and infantry units.

The unit is built around an internal frame that provides excellent mobility and power while still being capable of folding into a compact form for easy storage. Armor plating options vary, with light ceramics capable of withstanding small arms fire being the norm, but the UNSC RP34M Heavy Combat model features reinforced joints and thin Titanium A plating. JHI also produces the majority of the YMIR's VI programming and sensory systems in conjunction with Ariake Technologies [ATS], Hahne Kedar Defense [HKD], and Jormangund Technology [JGT]. The 'head' is an armored sensory array that provides the majority of environmental information as well as a communications suite to relay telemetry and remote operations. Coming in a variety of color schemes the body vaguely resembles a large upright bipedal sapient with two legs and two stunted arms that end at the elbow joint for attaching modular weapon systems. Model variants include: The original RP34A optimized for police use in SWAT and riot control roles; The more customizable RP34C available for purchase by private security forces and corporations; The hazardous duty RP34D meant for more punishing conditions on inhospitable environments; and the aforementioned RP34M created for military use. The YMIR series also shares a similar internal frame and structure with the Jotun RP178 ETTIN, a non combat heavy industrial mech used for automated cargo and mining operations.

Because of the diversity in models and applications the YMIR is capable of fielding a variety of offensive and defensive systems, including: Class I Kinetic Barrier Generation System; [2] Class I GARDIAN laser turrets; M72 Non Lethal Sonic Cannon; M242 Non Lethal Electrical Arc Projector; M149 Heavy Mass Accelerator Cannon; M261 Twin Mass Accelerator Autocannons; M181 Multi Threat Precision Kill Missile Launcher; and M490 Automatic Grenade Launcher. All models feature a HKD made targeting and threat analysis VI that can be customized per customer requests to access local secure networks to verify civilian identitags, government security clearances, and private security settings. The VI coding is touted by JHI and HKD to be error free and highly resistant to hacking or tampering. Military variants of the YMIR are also capable of being armed with a self destruct mechanism which detonates upon the unit sustaining heavy damage that would reduce operational capability below a set threshold. An optional electronic warfare suite is available for crowd control and limited military application.

Criticisms for the mech stem from various sources. Civil rights and government oversight groups are critical of the use of YMIR mechs by human law enforcement and the UNSC. They claim the VI programming errs on the side of overpowering force when dealing with crowds and is responsible for making riots worse with disproportionate responses. They also point to the supposed non lethal capacity of some weapon systems and several instances during the Second Insurrection War when YMIRs were used to storm into high population areas where the post mortem explosion was used to deal horrific casualties. Other complaints come from the UNSC and law enforcement, who feel the YMIR is ineffective in open terrain or against heavy assault in comparison to manned exoskeletons. Hacking is a concern as well, as the nature of electronic security is a never ending battle. Several high profile instances of a VI or robotic platform being subverted by insurrectionist forces during the Second Insurrection War highlight the fragility of dependence upon such systems.

One final area of worry is the emergence of YMIR models in service of the Eclipse Security Team based out of Illium. While technically authorized to operate within Citadel Space and therefore capable of applying for the expanded program open to private security forces, Eclipse is widely regarded as a mercenary organization with ties to questionable operations in the Terminus. Security experts question the move to allow Eclipse to purchase YMIR models despite their record of service as a private security force in the Asari Republics. As there is no assurance of proper handling by Eclipse teams in the Terminus in regards to protecting the technology or using it ethically many regard this as a public relations disaster for JHI and the Systems Alliance waiting to happen.

* * *

><p>Codex Entry: Saturn

The stunning and ringed gas giant Saturn is the sixth planet orbiting the star Sol. Named for an archaic human god of agriculture and time, the planet became a preferred destination early on in human space exploration for it's plethora of orbiting celestial bodies, strong magnetic field, and gentler gravitational pull than it's fellow giant Jupiter. The advent of slipstream and mass effect physics have turned this once primary deep space waypoint in the Sol system into a forgotten location and footnote in human history.

Composed primarily of hydrogen, the gas giant has a circumference of [Terran Translation: 378,675 km], gravitational pull of [Terran Translation: 1.065 g], and orbital period of [Terran Translation: 24.46 Terran years; 24,491 Local days]. The most prominent and impressive feature of the planet are a systems of rings made of ice and dust particles orbiting above the planet at ranges of [Terran Translation: 7,000 km] to [Terran Translation: 80,000 km]. Saturn has well over one hundred orbiting natural satellites, of which the two largest, Titan and Rhea, have seen significant development.

When humanity entered the first stages of space exploration, Saturn provided an ideal location for basing exploration into the outer edges of the Sol system. By the start of the Interplanetary War in [Terran Translation: 2160 CE, Terran Standard] there was an extensive array of orbiting scientific research stations as well as the surface settlements of Huygens Dome and Cassiniville on the moons Titan and Rhea, respectively. The outbreak of the war isolated the internationally run communities around Saturn as resupply missions halted, but thankfully the war itself never visited the planet. Following the war Saturn would see a dramatic boom in commercial expansion as scientists and engineers working for Ashland Energy Corporation successfully extracted and refined He3 from the planet's atmosphere. With nascent fusion technology already developed but primary fuels at a premium, this paved the way for a merger between the Ashland Energy Corporation and Eldfell Construction to provide the knowledge and infrastructure of building a host of automated extraction facilities around Saturn. This economic growth provided the groundwork for other corporations to open operations around Saturn, particularly extraction of hydrocarbons from Titan and water ice from moons like Dione, Enceladus, Iapetus, Rhea, and Tethys.

Unfortunately this period would aid in it's own decline by being the starting point for expansion to Uranus and construction of the

massive and ambitious deep space research facility Gagarin station at the Sun-Neptune L5 point. Over the next century helium extraction and refinement industry would shift to Uranus which possessed more plentiful helium and weaker gravity than Saturn. The opening of Gagarin station would shift the focus of deep space scientific study away from Saturn as well. The discovery of the Prothean Archives on Mars and subsequent discoveries of Charon Relay proved to be the determinate factor in the end of already flagging interest in Saturn.

Today Saturn and it's moons have long since been abandoned by humanity as a possibility for colonization and resource extraction for more productive and remunerative interstellar locations. Instead it sees a minor renaissance as a classified strategic military outpost in the Sol system under the Saturn Military Reorganization Authorization Act, where the UNSC maintains military training, refueling, discharging, system observation, and defense facilities including several Air Force wings.

* * *

><p>Codex Entry: Titan

Titan, or Saturn VI, is the sixth major celestial body orbiting the gas giant Saturn in the Sol system of the Orior star cluster. Once home to a thriving colonization effort by humans, it has since been abandoned and repurposed by the UNSC as the Titan Training Center and Proving Grounds.

The moon, named after a race of deities from an ancient human mythology, is tidally locked to it's parent Saturn as it completes a single orbit in [Terran Translation: 15.9 Terran days]. It's composition consists primarily of water in liquid and ice states formed in layers around a still warm rocky core. Terrestrial properties include an equatorial circumference of [Terran Translation: 16,177.5 km], a gravitational pull of [Terran Translation: 0.14g], and a rough surface temperature of [Terran Translation: -179.5 Celsius].

A rarity in moons, Titan possesses a thick atmosphere made of nitrogen with methane and trace amounts of hydrocarbons that drives a native climate. The interactions between the layers of Titan gives rise to tectonics and cryovolcano activity which play a role in Titan's atmosphere and methane cycle. Methane and other hydrocarbons create conflicting greenhouse and solar absorption layers for a net warming effect. A methane cycle produces rainfall, clouds, storm systems, subsurface aquifers, lakes, rivers, and small seas. These processes have influenced Titan's topography in ways similar to conventional garden worlds, creating volcanic plains, mountains chains, valleys, bodies of water, windswept plains, and dune seas.

Humans would establish their first presence on Titan in [Terran Translation: 2149 CE, Terran Standard] with the Huygens International Research Cooperative. Built as a joint scientific research and colonization effort, the facility and it's occupants would see dark days during the duration of the Interplanetary War with supplies running dangerously low and critical failures in vital life support systems. It would rebound in the aftermath of the war, revitalized by the surge in interest around Saturn following the He3 boom. The

facility would go through several expansion phases, adding living and work quarters until an arcology dome encompassing the facility was put in place by [Terran Translation: 2196 CE, Terran Standard]. Other facilities would join the renamed Huygens Dome on the surface of Titan , but none would reach the same stature or size. Titan continued to experience population growth for several decades as it supported the various deep space research and He3 extraction operations orbiting Saturn, reaching a high of [11,328] in [Terran Translation: 2240 CE, Terran Standard]. The opening of He3 extraction on Uranus and planned creation of the Gagarin deep space operations station would start a slow death for interest in Titan which would be finalized with interstellar travel.

The Systems Alliance would pass the controversial Saturn Military Reorganization Authorization Act in [Terran Translation: 2378 CE, Terran Standard], which handed control of the planet, moons, and all associated orbital stations over to the UNSC. Private enterprise and citizens still present were not allowed to appeal but were compensated for the loss of assets and cost of relocation. By [Terran Translation: 2382 CE, Terran Standard] the UNSC had classified the planet and placed a no orbit zone for unauthorized vessels. Titan would be repurposed as the Titan Training Center and Proving Grounds, a surface and atmospheric warfare training center controlled by the orbiting Fort Charles Upham station. The existing facilities and orbital stations from Titan's heyday now serve as set pieces for live action war games and testing environments for technologies the UNSC is researching.

15. Time Flies Interlude

****AN: A tremendous amount of apologies are due from me because of the lack of attention and dedication I have shown this fic.****

****I'm terribly sorry. I really have no excuses beyond real life intruding upon my free time and a real dissatisfaction I have had with trying to complete the upcoming chapters. The content didn't really reflect my ideas early on and in fact seemed to be getting away from me with an ever expanding list of topics and plots to introduce. That made it easy for me to simply ignore them while I moved forward with other aspects of the fic I am excited to get to.****

****Not a very mature way to handle things for sure.****

****I'm still not very satisfied with these these chapters but since they seem to be the roadblock in my way to getting this fic to where I want to go I've decided to quit procrastinating and give them a final revision before publishing. Maybe I'll come back to them at a later date and do some editing once I've gained enough distance from this setback.****

****So without further ado we move forward with Shepard's journey as a young Marine in the UNSC.****

* * *

><p>[\ UNSC Records [A] UNSC Admin Mil [to] Luis V Shepard 5923-LS-2826 [A] UNSC Marines Mil \] [\ 2572-12-07

\]**

[\ The following message contains sensitive personnel records and is to be viewed only by the intended recipient

Issue of change of duty station/military entrance training phase one completion per pursuant to UNSC Order 178-B

Private Second Grade Shepard, Luis Vincent [5923-LS-2826]

We would like to extend our congratulations on your approved status for completion of Military Vocational Training from [UNSC Training Facility Three, Twenty Second Training Battalion, Bravo Company]. You have been assigned to active duty service with [UNSC Marines, 8th Marine Corps, 35th Frontier Division, 29th Force Projection Regiment, 14th Marine Light Patrol/Response Brigade, 331st Marine Light Infantry Battalion, Charlie Company] at [UNSC Naval Depot Three, Czarnobog]. A reservation in your name has been placed with the civilian transport agency flight [Spaceways Flight 5002] leaving [Rakesh Sharma Orbital Station] at [1130, Local Time] on [2572-12-07]. Connecting transportation will be provided at [UNSC Spacelift Command Center, Amaterasu] located on [Jimmu Orbital Station, Deck 3, Gate 18]. Failure to comply with this order for movement will be dealt with to the full extent of UNSC Military Justice. If you have difficulty reaching your destination, please inform [\ UNSC Dispatch [A] UNSC CENTCOM01 \]

Per your completion your personnel records have been updated with the following promotions, certifications, and/or authorizations:

UNSC Marines Rank: E2; Private, Second Grade

UNSC Augmentation: Level 1, Standard Issue: Neural Interface

UNSC Augmentation: Level 2, Special Issue: Biotic Cybernetic Suite

UNSC Augmentation: Level 1, Standard Issue: Infantry Genetics Package

Per your completion your personnel records have been updated with the following Military Vocational Identifier ratings:

B1 [UNSC Novice Light Infantryman]

02W/OA; 01W/OD [Small Arms Weapon Systems: Light Infantry Package; Small Arms Weapon Systems: Basic Marksmanship]

01W/OA [Squad Level Weapon Systems: Light Infantry Package]

01W/OA [Melee Weapon Systems]

01W/OC [Squad Level Field Explosives: Light Infantry Package]

02EB [Multi Threat Combatives]

01EE [Terrestrial Navigation]

02EI [Environment Survival]

01ES [Terrestrial Tactics/Strategy]

01SA [Tactical Sensory Management]

Per your completion your personnel records have been updated with the following awards/commendations and are available for wear with your dress uniform:

UNSC Infantryman Badge, Level 1

UNSC Biotic Warfare Badge, Level 1

We commend you on your completion of initial training and expect you to carry on the long tradition of warriors in defense of humanity.

Defend Humanity

UNSC Records VI 753-082 Sydney; UNSC Records VI 046-337 Arcturus; Lieutenant Eldridge Phu, Arcturus Office of Personnel Records /]

* * *

><p>[Private Waypoint Vid Transcript] [\ 2572-12-07
\]

**Username: HyacinthBouquet [Klara Tercsa Palinkas; Identitag:
Mindoir 314433KTP2554]**

**HyacinthBouquet [Login] [Online] [Greater Joughin Metro Area, Malta
Province, Benning, Euler, Arcturus Stream Cluster]**

**Username: BekensteinsMonster [Luis Vincent Shepard; Identitag:
Mindoir 847261LVS2554]**

**BekensteinsMonster [Login] [Online] [Intrasystem Comm Buoy 10-43,
Sol System, Orior Cluster]**

HyacinthBouquet: [Unintelligible] Oh wow. It really is
you.

BekensteinsMonster: Heh. Yeah. You look great. Like, really
great.

HyacinthBouquet: Thanks. You look good too.

BekensteinsMonster: Thanks.

HyacinthBouquet: Even with the, uh...
[Unintelligible]

BekensteinsMonster: Heh. I know. Everyone seems to keep talking about
my hair being cut this short.

HyacinthBouquet: Yeah. What's up with that? Not that you look bad.
You look... older. More mature than I remember.
Rugged.

BekensteinsMonster: Well that's one way of putting it. In that case
you can thank the UNSC.

HyacinthBouquet: Really? Well you should update your public extranet profile.

BekensteinsMonster: Maybe. I haven't updated that thing in months because of my training. I just graduated from my MVC yesterday.

HyacinthBouquet: Impressive.

BekensteinsMonster: [Unintelligible] Not really.

HyacinthBouquet: Well it's more than I've done.

BekensteinsMonster: I guess. So...

HyacinthBouquet: Yeah?

BekensteinsMonster: Uh, how are you?

HyacinthBouquet: Good. Nice to see a familiar face from... you know. Home.

BekensteinsMonster: Yeah. That how you wound up on Benning?

HyacinthBouquet: Stalking me, huh? Is that part of your training?

BekensteinsMonster: What? No! I just looked up your public extranet profile and saw you were listed as living on Benning.

HyacinthBouquet: That sure sounds like stalking to me.

BekensteinsMonster: Sorry. I didn't mean for it to come across like that.

HyacinthBouquet: Don't worry. I'm just teasing.

BekensteinsMonster: Right.

HyacinthBouquet: I forgot how easily embarrassed you are. And how much fun it was to witness.

BekensteinsMonster: Well I guess some things never change, huh?

HyacinthBouquet: I hope not. I always thought you were so cute the way you would get flustered or shy.

BekensteinsMonster: Not sure if that was a compliment or insult.

HyacinthBouquet: Why not both?

BekensteinsMonster: Glad to know we're still operating at the toddler level. Just to clarify, if I pull on your hair that just means I like you.

HyacinthBouquet: I would hope so. I really enjoy it when a guy does that but I normally don't do that on the first date. We'll have to work our way up to that.

BekensteinsMonster: [Unintelligible] Nice. So what else do you do besides torment guys in vidchats?

HyacinthBouquet: Attending Uni here. I came to live with my uncle and his family after the raid.

BekensteinsMonster: Your parents?

HyacinthBouquet: [Unintelligible] My mom was taken. The rest of us managed to get away, but dad... he's not right anymore. Heartbroken I guess. Losing mom really changed him. He stayed on Mindoir and still runs the farm, but insisted me and my brother move back to the inner colonies with my uncle. Said it wasn't safe anymore.

BekensteinsMonster: Shit. I'm sorry. Maybe we shouldn't talk about this.

HyacinthBouquet: It's okay. I mean, it's been a couple of years and there's no sense in ignoring our shared past, right? I suppose everyone from Mindoir has a story like that to tell.

BekensteinsMonster: Yeah. Not exactly a great topic to have in common, huh?

HyacinthBouquet: No. Kind of morbid, actually. What about you? Is your family okay?

BekensteinsMonster: Both my parents died. Me and my sisters moved in with my grandparents on Bekenstein.

HyacinthBouquet: I guess that explains your username. I'm sorry to hear that. I really liked your mom. She was always so nice whenever I had to visit the hospital. [Unintelligible] Well, at least your parents are not suffering as a slave somewhere right now.

BekensteinsMonster: Pretty sure both of us would prefer a third option where none of this ever happened.

HyacinthBouquet: Yeah. I do. Maybe if things hadn't changed you and I would be having this conversation a long time ago.

BekensteinsMonster: That would have been a much better alternative.

HyacinthBouquet: So you said your sisters are alive and well? How are they?

BekensteinsMonster: Doing alright. Still annoying.

HyacinthBouquet: Your older sister was my idol back in Nouveau Basel. She was always so stylish and pretty. Her and your mother. They were

nothing like what you expect colonists on an outer colony to be like. Everyone wanted to be like them. And all the guys daydreamed about them. Some of the girls too.

BekensteinsMonster: [Unintelligible] Clearly none of you actually had a conversation with my older sister.

HyacinthBouquet: Ha. I thought that was more your younger sister. Now that was a nightmare. I was genuinely terrified of her.

BekensteinsMonster: Then it sounds like you had enough sense to steer clear of her.

HyacinthBouquet: You know she punched my cousin in the face when he tried to kiss her, right? Broke his nose.

BekensteinsMonster: What? When did this happen?

HyacinthBouquet: Like a few weeks before the raid.

BekensteinsMonster: I never heard anything about that. You should probably be glad that's all she did.

HyacinthBouquet: I bet. I've heard other stories about her. So where are you now?

BekensteinsMonster: Still in Sol. Headed to Amaterasu in the Stream. From there I catch a connecting transport to Borvo. Going to be stationed at Czarnobog Fleet Depot.

HyacinthBouquet: Oh. You're staying in the Stream?

BekensteinsMonster: Uh. Yeah.

HyacinthBouquet: Then we definitely have to meet up. Catch up on old times.

BekensteinsMonster: What old times? You mean the part where I was too busy trying not to embarrass myself in front of you?

HyacinthBouquet: I was thinking more along the lines of you trying to pretend you're not staring at my ass.

BekensteinsMonster: Uh, okay. I guess I wasn't as subtle as I had hoped.

HyacinthBouquet: No. You really weren't.

BekensteinsMonster: Sorry. In my defense I was a hormonal teenage idiot with zero subtlety.

HyacinthBouquet: Okay. And what's your defense now if you were to do it again?

BekensteinsMonster: Uh, I'm a full grown hormonal idiot with zero subtlety?

HyacinthBouquet: It's okay. I would have done the same thing as your sister if it had annoyed me back then.

BekensteinsMonster: Oh, okay. Wait. [Unintelligible] Are you saying what I think you're saying?

HyacinthBouquet: What I'm saying is that maybe we should meet up to see if we can catch up on old times. After the raid... [Unintelligible] thing can change fast, y'know? Maybe we can make some new memories. Together. That is if being a marine helped you get over your shyness?

BekensteinsMonster: Well, I'm pretty sure they did not cover that in my training. Which mostly consisted of kill it. Or eat it. Or sleep.

HyacinthBouquet: That's fine then. I can help you with some remedial tutoring. A real hands on education. No sims or haptics... unless you're interested in that sort of thing.

BekensteinsMonster: Wow. You're... a lot more bold and flirty than I remember.

HyacinthBouquet: Well I was a sheltered outer colony girl then. After everything that happened I've learned not to take things for granted. Like cute guys that I had a crush on contacting me.

BekensteinsMonster: Are you sure?

HyacinthBouquet: Do you think I would be saying this if I wasn't?

BekensteinsMonster: Works for me.

HyacinthBouquet: Good. Look, I have to run. I have class in about ten minutes. But can we chat or sim about this later?

BekensteinsMonster: Sure. I'm probably going to be on this transport for another two or three days. Depends upon the layover at Arcturus. Then there's the transfer at Amaterasu.

HyacinthBouquet: So it sounds like you've got some time to kill on your hands.

BekensteinsMonster: Yeah. Willing to help me out with a pair of extra hands?

HyacinthBouquet: Look at you! And you didn't even blush!

BekensteinsMonster: [Unintelligible] Trust me, I'm fighting it.

HyacinthBouquet: Don't fight it too much. I like it. But we'll talk or message later. Okay?

BekensteinsMonster: Sure thing. This turned out a whole lot better

than I expected.

HyacinthBouquet: It sure did. Bye Luis.

BekensteinsMonster: Bye Klara.

****HyacinthBouquet: [Offline]****

****BekensteinsMonster: [Offline]****

* * *

><p>Extranet Records [\ 2572-12-07 \]

[Search Term] Commercial transports between Borvo and Euler systems

[Search Term] Commercial transports between Izanagi and Euler systems

[Search Term] Extranet interstellar data plans

[Purchase] Atlas Communications Tier 3 Interstellar Data Package

[Search Term] Simulstim communications

[Purchase] Naphtali Simulstim Telecom Suite Series 2 Package

* * *

><p>[\ Elvira M Pazmino [A] BAires FS Earth [to] Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein \] [\ 2572-12-07 \]

[\ Are you so busy that you can't even call your great grandmother to tell her about your graduation? \]

****[\ Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein [to] Elvira M Pazmino [A] BAires FS Earth \] [\ 2572-12-07 \]****

[\ I am so sorry. It's been hectic. Just barely got to sit down and rest on the transport. How are you? \]

****[\ Elvira M Pazmino [A] BAires FS Earth [to] Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein \] [\ 2572-12-07 \]****

[\ Still alive. Not that you've bothered to check. Well? Are you going to make me ask for a holo or vid? \]

****[\ Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein [to] Elvira M Pazmino [A] BAires FS Earth \] [\ 2572-12-07 \]****

[\ It's not exactly what you think, but sure. [Tap to view holo] \]

****[\ Elvira M Pazmino [A] BAries FS Earth [to] Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein \] [\ 2572-12-07 \]****

[\ By all that is holy in the entire galaxy... what have you done to your head? You had such beautiful hair! \]

**[\\ Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein [to] Elvira M Pazmino [A]
BAries FS Earth \\] [\\ 2572-12-07 \\]**

[\\ Why does everyone keep saying that? There is nothing wrong with my
head. I look fine. \\]

**[\\ Elvira M Pazmino [A] BAries FS Earth [to] Luis V Shepard [A]
Sarg Bekenstein \\] [\\ 2572-12-07 \\]**

[\\ My poor boy. You never did have much fashion sense. How do you
ever expect to find a nice human girl and settle down? \\]

**[\\ Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein [to] Elvira M Pazmino [A]
BAries FS Earth \\] [\\ 2572-12-07 \\]**

[\\ That's the last thing on my mind right now. \\]

**[\\ Elvira M Pazmino [A] BAries FS Earth [to] Luis V Shepard [A]
Sarg Bekenstein \\] [\\ 2572-12-07 \\]**

[\\ I suppose. You're young. Do you have the contraceptive implants?
\\]

**[\\ Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein [to] Elvira M Pazmino [A]
BAries FS Earth \\] [\\ 2572-12-07 \\]**

[\\ We are not having this conversation. \\]

**[\\ Elvira M Pazmino [A] BAries FS Earth [to] Luis V Shepard [A]
Sarg Bekenstein \\] [\\ 2572-12-07 \\]**

[\\ Oh don't be bashful. I remember what it was like to be your age.
Sex is a beautiful thing with the right person. It's important you be
responsible and mature about it. And I know what those UNSC types are
like. Got to know quite a few of them before I met your bastard of a
great grandfather. The stories I could tell. \\]

**[\\ Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein [to] Elvira M Pazmino [A]
BAries FS Earth \\] [\\ 2572-12-07 \\]**

[\\ I should go, bisabuela. \\]

**[\\ Elvira M Pazmino [A] BAries FS Earth [to] Luis V Shepard [A]
Sarg Bekenstein \\] [\\ 2572-12-07 \\]**

[\\ Take care of yourself and don't make me wait months to hear from
you again. And stay away from those blue hussies. They're nothing but
trouble. \\]

* * *

><p>[\\ Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein [to]
Araceli L Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein \\] *****[\\ 2572-12-07
\\]****

[\\ Out of sheer curiosity, did you happen to break the nose of a boy
who tried to kiss you back on Mindoir? \\]

****[\\ Araceli L Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein [to] Luis V Shepard [A]

Sarg Bekenstein \] [\ 2572-12-07 \]****

[\ Wow. Random. Yes. Roland Pataki. The little socially awkward fucktard and his equally fucking demented friends were going around trying to kiss girls and grab boobs and butts. He learned the hard way what happens when you fuck with a Shepard. You're not the only one who goes around punching people, Pavlo Punchout. Lucky I didn't rip that oversized melon off his shoulders and take a piss down his throat. Why? Who have you been gossiping with? \]

****[\ Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein [to] Araceli L Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein \] *****[\ 2572-12-07 \]****

[\ Not important. Just looking to verify that bit of information. Also, you're psychotic. I mean, I love you and I'm glad you taught that kid a lesson, but you're psychotic. \]

****[\ Araceli L Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein [to] Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein \] [\ 2572-12-07 \]****

[\ Uh huh. Keep your secrets. I know it has to be someone from Mindoir. I'll figure it out. \]

* * *

><p>ANN Newsbreak: Breaking News; Insurrectionist Malcolm Ewers Found Guilty For Mazu Orbital Station Massacre [December 8th, 2572 Standard Terran Calendar]

As expected the Magistrate's High Court on Arcturus Station has handed down a guilty verdict to Malcolm Ewers, age [74], over his role in the [Terran Translation: 2556 CE, Terran Standard] insurrectionist attack. The high profile [6] [Terran] month trial had become an extranet spectacle for several passionate outbursts, a handful of celebrity appearances, horrific never seen before vids and holos of the aftermath, and shocking revelations as the Ministry of Intelligence and Investigations [MI2] released secret files during the course of the trial. Ewers, once the most wanted criminal in Systems Alliance space and an outspoken United Rebel Front [URF] firebrand, was a shadow of his younger self and remained subdued as the court clerk VI relayed the guilty verdicts on: [384] counts of murder; [2] counts of possession of an illegally fabricated item; [2] counts of arms trafficking; [6] counts of orbital security violation; [5] count of interstellar armaments transport; [1] count of illegal use of a controlled substance [anti matter]; [1] count detonation of a controlled substance [anti matter]; [1] count of illegal dispersal of a controlled substance [element zero]; And [3] counts of terrorism. Prosecutors failed to convict Ewers on charges of illegal fabrication of arms or tie him to other crimes he is believed to have committed prior to and after the devastating attack above Shanxi.

The combined sentences associated with the guilty charges carry a minimum total of [571] [Terran] years, meaning Ewers now faces the possibility of execution as the total exceeds the median human life expectancy of [150] [Terran] years. Experts on insurrection terrorism, criminal behavior reprogramming, and neural cybernetic interfacing are expected to testify during the upcoming sentencing portion of the trial to see if Ewers meets the minimum standards for public safety required for corrective therapy and eventual parole

after stasis imprisonment.

[Tap to view vids and sims of the trial]

While the news of the verdict was met with general cheer and jubilation across Systems Alliance space, not all were pleased with the results.

Chief Defense Counsel Jelisaveta Peck of Tsai and Borshevsky: "Of course we plan to appeal this ridiculous decision. It's no secret this sham court was a mockery of justice. My client was tried in the court of public opinion for years and never stood a chance. We have never denied he was present and involved in this series of unfortunate events, but to try him as the mastermind of it all is typical overreach by MI Squared. Now we have to deal with the equally heinous notion that the prosecution is going to try and parade out a series of 'choices' for sentencing that are little more than the biggest civil rights violations this side of the Terminus."

[Tap to view history of insurrectionist trials in Systems Alliance courts]

Throughout the trial Systems Alliance has remained silent as to whether they will seek execution for Ewers, but a statement made by a senior MI2 official related to the case shed some light.

Ministry of Intelligence and Investigations Deputy Attorney General Adil Nakae: "Nothing we do can ever compensate for the innocent victims who had their lives, their dreams, their futures ripped from them that March day sixteen years ago. But today, a soothing balm of justice has been applied to the wounds of those still living. A final chapter is being written in this tragic tale that hopefully ends with Malcolm Ewers tasting a fraction of the fear and hopelessness the hundreds of his victims felt when he callously and ruthlessly killed them over his bankrupt ideology. Let this be a warning to those who would harm the innocent and attempt to strike fear in the Systems Alliance. We will not break. We will not bend. And no matter how long it takes we will bring you to justice."

[Tap to view history of Malcolm Ewers terrorism career]

Outside of the courtroom, and via live telepresence sims being relayed across the galaxy, those sentiments were echoed across the spectrum of survivors and families of the slain.

Survivor and Victim Family Member Rozella McPartland: "I know I should be the bigger person and not sink to their level, but I want this man dead. Maybe that makes me a terrible person... but I don't care. He took away everything that ever mattered to me. My husband and my two girls. I nearly died from vacuum exposure. It took me weeks to recover from the physical injuries, and I've never recovered from the fact my family... I can't... he's a monster. All of them are. Every damn Innies. We shouldn't stop here. Why do we have to wait until they kill again? We should go out into the Terminus and bomb every single Innies planet until there's nothing left. They can't be allowed to live. They're monsters and they'll hurt people again."

[Tap to view timeline of insurrectionist attacks in Systems Alliance space]

Of course there were those who were dubious of the decision made and worried the Systems Alliance was set upon a path fraught with consequences.

Civil Rights Advocate Herschel Salsman: "This is like watching history repeat on a looped vid. The Systems Alliance and all media outlets should be ashamed of themselves the way they've ginned up public sentiment and outrage to bolster support or viewcounts. Ewers is undoubtedly guilty for his involvement in the Mazu Massacre and I completely agree with pursuing justice, but it's like everyone has forgotten that these sort of public inquisitions and witch hunts lead to both insurrection wars. And now they're talking about execution? What purpose will that serve? Other than stirring up more resentment and fury in the insurrectionist communities? It's almost as if the Systems Alliance and UNSC want another insurrection war. And why not? The first two were so grand why not go for a third? Third times the charm, after all."

[Tap to view timeline of Systems Alliance and UNSC responses to insurrection]

Experts on incarceration and inmate behavioral reprogramming cast doubts on both sides of the argument.

Universitat Cydonia Institute of Neurocybernetics and Behavioral Adjustment Lead Researcher Doctor Adena Goenka: "Despite these therapies and technologies being commonplace there exists a great deal of misunderstanding in the general public and even the halls of Arcturus. While it is a preferable alternative to something barbaric like execution, this is not a victimless or easy path. We can't work miracles with modern technology and practices without violating major aspects of personal agency and free will. And even then that's just in the best case scenario. It's largely ineffective over the long term in an unwilling subject who fights it, invariably resulting in degraded neural capacity and even worse behavioral problems. Malcolm Ewers would have to want to undergo this therapy and be an active participant in the process of his rehabilitation. And everything I have been privy to in this man's psychological profile points toward him being a die hard ideological insurrectionist who will be fighting this at every step. I don't envy any of my colleagues who have to explain this to anyone who is dead set on either outcome of his sentencing. We're going to have to face the facts that in order to preserve his civil rights, he's going to be facing execution or being locked away indefinitely in his own mind."

[Tap to view [Terran Translation: 2569 CE, Terran Standard] Uxe Monastery Academy Convention on Neurocybernetics]

The Council is expected to weigh in, particularly in the event of an appeal to the Citadel courts to invalidate the Systems Alliance verdicts.

Citadel Council Magistrate Consul Mastan Gelon: "We continue to observe and take note of the happenings in the Systems Alliance high courts with great solicitude. While the Council has a set policy and past precedent of not wishing to interfere in the internal workings of a Charter member, we still reserve the right to interject our authority in matters that deal with the very social fabric and security of the civilized sectors of the galaxy. There is too much at

risk to be left to chance. With that said, the Council supports the Systems Alliance and continues to find their behavior to be within the allowed framework of the Citadel Charter."

[Tap to see history of Citadel Council involving themselves in the matters of Citadel Charter governments]

Although they were not present for the trial for fear of their own safety or imprisonment, Ewer's family, members of the [URF], and allied insurrectionists spoke to media outlets at length over their outrage.

Kathleen Bosma, Ewer's sister and exonerated former political prisoner: "This is an atrocity! It proves exactly the point of why we refuse to support the fascist Systems Alliance or feel the slightest bit of guilt or sympathy for the slaughtered sheep! You and your ilk rant about those who die in our attempt to gain freedom for all, but don't blink an eye when the very state you worship bends their knee before their xeno masters, violates your rights at every corner, regulates you into acceptance of an existence under a police state, taxes you into poverty, and finally kills you in macabre ways for their amusement! Perhaps instead of rushing to celebrate the corrupt empire's concept of justice by sentencing my brother maybe some of you lemmings should pause and ask yourselves exactly how they came about apprehending him? Can you guess? They used violence! They used your taxpayer credits to fund their violent and authoritarian UNSC attack dogs and in the process murdered my son! But I suppose that's perfectly fine in the myopic and amoral worldview you have all been conditioned to accept, right? If any of you even care to acknowledge he existed or that the UNSC murdered him, then most of you can dismiss him as just another violent Innie that deserved to die! Because it's too painful or difficult for you to wake from your compliant stupor to fathom that each and every one of you have had a hand in funding and enabling an oppressive and violent empire!"

[Tap to see further responses from insurrectionists]

The human law enforcement and intelligence communities see the successful prosecution of Ewers as a milestone in closing the airlock on one of the darkest chapters of the Second Insurrection War.

Ministry of Intelligence and Investigations Counter Terrorism Director Truman Villagomez: "I'd be lying if I said this wasn't satisfying. I've worked at this job for close to sixty years now, and nothing still haunts me like what I saw that day in orbit above Shanxi. The cold, lifeless bodies of children... infants... floating in space. It sticks with you. It breeds a level of contempt for insurrectionists that you can't understand. These people are monsters. I get it. No one likes to pay taxes and we all complain about politicians on Arcturus, but when you take up arms, against your own people, you've crossed a line. You become something so odious and foul that you can no longer be classified as human, or sapient. As far as the claims go about the UNSC being involved in killing Ewers' nephew, I can't give any specifics, but I can state, after reviewing some of the evidence and discussions with my peers in HIGHCOM and ONI, that the UNSC didn't fire a single shot in the apprehension of Ewers. Now if you excuse me, I have a dinner to attend to celebrate over a decade of hard work paying off in finally

nailling this bastard. I'm not going to shed a tear or lose an ounce of sleep over his fate. And tonight, just maybe, myself and so many others can finally sleep without fears of having dreams about dead children floating in space."

[Tap to see vids and holos of the attack and aftermath[Warning: Graphic Unedited Material; Identitag Age Restrictions Enforced]]

A nondenominational remembrance ceremony is scheduled to be held at the Mazu Orbital Station above Shanxi at [Terran Translation: 1145 Terran Standard, Local Time]. Speeches are expected by Systems Alliance Prime Minister Tamica Zupan as well as local politicians and community leaders. The event will be relayed live for vid and sim viewers across the galaxy.

Federal Territories of Shanxi President Ren Zhenzhen: "The strength of the people of Shanxi has been in our capacity to not only withstand the harsh and violent nature of history, but thrive in direct defiance of it. We are a hardy people who have seen more than our share of war and violence. We are the home of the irrepressible human spirit and the heart of the human will to survive. The streets and squares of our cities bear landmarks and scars from wars past. And even our orbital stations have memorials to the dead. We welcome the thoughts and prayers sent from our brothers and sisters across Systems Alliance space, and beyond, who wish to join us in our moment of silence to honor those Shanxians lost."

[Tap to bookmark and set reminder for Mazu remembrance ceremony livestream]

* * *

><p>[Private Waypoint Vidchat Transcript] [\ 2572-12-08
\]

Username: BekensteinsMonster [Luis Vincent Shepard; Identitag: Mindoir 847261LVS2554]

BekensteinsMonster [Login] [Online] [Intrasystem Comm Buoy 03-10, Arcturus System, Arcturus Stream Cluster]

Username: PolinitziTsarina [Anna Stanislava Vasilyeva; Identitag: Earth 903727ASV2551]

PolinitziTsarin [Login] [Online] [Exocoetus, Proteus, Athens, Artemis Tau]

BekensteinsMonster: Hey, Anna. How's your flight training going?

PolinitziTsarina: Good until you started bothering me. You've got a lot of nerve just starting up a vidchat like nothing happened, Elvis.

BekensteinsMonster: Wow. Harsh. Are you still mad?

PolinitziTsarina: [Unintelligible] What do you think?

BekensteinsMonster: That you should believe me. I didn't talk about

or show anyone the holo. It's the guy I was always complaining to you about in my squad. Finch.

PolinitziTsarina: How did he see it?

BekensteinsMonster: That night you sent it he was in the laundry room. When I checked it on my omnitool he saw it. Sorry.

PolinitziTsarina: That's it? How did Kemp find out?

BekensteinsMonster: Finch blabbed about it.

PolinitziTsarina: So you didn't act like some little perv and show it off to all your buddies?

BekensteinsMonster: Do you really think I would do that?

PolinitziTsarina: [Unintelligible] No. You're too nice to do something like that.

BekensteinsMonster: I know that's supposed to be an insult, but in this case, I'll take it.

PolinitziTsarina: It's not like I was naked, or that I even care. I just don't like the fact that little bastard Kemp is messaging me asking why he didn't get one too.

BekensteinsMonster: He's just playing around but I can understand why that's starting to piss you off. I'll tell him to stop. [Unintelligible] If it makes you feel better, Finch did the same thing to a holo of my older sister in a bikini.

PolinitziTsarina: Why would you think that hearing about what immature little pricks you guys can be towards women would make me feel better? If anything it makes you all sound like a bigger group of immature assholes than I originally thought.

BekensteinsMonster: You do realize this guy was talking about my sister too?

PolinitziTsarina: You should have kicked his ass then. I thought you were supposed to be some big bad marine?

BekensteinsMonster: Well, for your information, I fought him the same night you sent the holo.

PolinitziTsarina: Really? Because of the holo?

BekensteinsMonster: Kind of. He made a comment about it and that was the last straw. And it wasn't much of a fight, but I won. [Unintelligible] I think.

PolinitziTsarina: You have got to be the worst person to tell a story ever. Make a girl feel all special and tingly about fighting for her honor, and then say you think you won. Lame.

BekensteinsMonster: Then I should be more clear. When I said it

wasn't much of a fight, I meant you have no honor to fight for.

PolinitziTsarina: [Unintelligible] Bastard. Can't say I didn't see that one coming.

BekensteinsMonster: Are we okay?

PolinitziTsarina: Yeah. Sorry for flipping out on you. We're still friends. [Unintelligible] So what's up with you? I take it your graduation went well?

BekensteinsMonster: Yeah it was okay. But we're not friends.

PolinitziTsarina: [Unintelligible] Uh, why not?

BekensteinsMonster: Friends don't give friends lists of bogus phrases in Russian to use.

PolinitziTsarina: [Unintelligible] That. [Unintelligible] I completely forgot. How'd that turn out for you?

BekensteinsMonster: [Unintelligible] I got a drink thrown at me.

PolinitziTsarina: [Unintelligible] You're kidding! Please tell me someone got a holo or vid of that! Because that's awesome!

BekensteinsMonster: It really wasn't. You try coming back to the barracks literally smelling like alcohol and explaining that to a drill instructor. The only consolation is that she thought it was funnier than you do.

PolinitziTsarina: Your drill instructor sounds like my type of woman.

BekensteinsMonster: Yeah. Certifiably insane. There isn't a neural therapy created that can fix what's wrong with either of you.

PolinitziTsarina: [Unintelligible] Don't get all hurt because you struck out in Russia. Guess you can't handle real women.

BekensteinsMonster: Actually I'm beginning to think it's more than just the ones from Russia.

PolinitziTsarina: Please. You're used to those crazy outer colony girls or the high maintenance ones from Bekenstein.

BekensteinsMonster: Not all the people on an outer colony are crazy.

PolinitziTsarina: Yeah yeah. Fine. I'm sure you and your family were some of the few perfectly sane ones.

BekensteinsMonster: Actually, if we're going to discuss my family

then crazy or high maintenance definitely applies.

PolinitziTsarina: Well it's nice that you can admit there's a family history of crazy and high maintenance. Those sort of admissions are the first step in admitting you have a problem.

BekensteinsMonster: Then what's your excuse?

PolinitziTsarina: I'm Russian. I'm fucking awesome.

BekensteinsMonster: You're fucking something. Just not awesome.

PolinitziTsarina: Unfortunately you're correct. I'm not fucking anything here. This class is so lame. Half of them are weird nerds and the other half are egomaniacs. Basically whenever any of them open their mouths it ruins the image no matter how attractive they are.

BekensteinsMonster: This is my shocked face. I'm shocked you have standards.

PolinitziTsarina: [Unintelligible] Maybe if I never had to see any of these people ever again I might consider it with some of them. But having to deal with them on a daily basis for the next four months? Forget about it.

BekensteinsMonster: Nice to see you've got your priorities straight. You're there for training, not to screw your fellow trainees.

PolinitziTsarina: Says the guy who already graduated from his training. After this then it's off to OCS on Luna for eight months. If things don't get better I'm going to develop hand cramps from having to get myself off.

BekensteinsMonster: Yeah but think of how strong a handshake you'll have. Just be sure to wash your hands before you give those handshakes. People might get the wrong idea.

PolinitziTsarina: [Unintelligible] Good point. So? What about you? Excited to be headed to your base and scout out the talent?

BekensteinsMonster: [Unintelligible] You do realize I'm headed to a Naval Fleet Depot out in the middle of nowhere, right?

PolinitziTsarina: Exactly! Stuck in a remote location with downtime around a bunch of hot young marines and sailors? What could be better?

BekensteinsMonster: Well, there's learning to do my job better. That's something to do with my downtime. Then there's working on my college education. I can always practice my biotics.

PolinitziTsarina: Booooooring.

BekensteinsMonster: Yeah, I get how being responsible might bore you.

PolinitziTsarina: You're seriously not going to try to get laid?

BekensteinsMonster: I mean if it happens, it happens.
[Unintelligible] Besides, I'm kind of talking to someone right now.

PolinitziTsarina: Really? When did this happen? Who is it?
[Unintelligible] Wait. Are you and Kemp really fucking? I was only joking about that.

BekensteinsMonster: That joke wasn't funny the first time you said it. Now it's just pathetic you keep using old material.

PolinitziTsarina: No need to get all defensive. There's nothing wrong with liking other guys. I enjoy the company of a lady every once in a while myself.

BekensteinsMonster: [Unintelligible] I don't like guys, but if I did do you think he would be my type?

PolinitziTsarina: It wouldn't be my first choice, but who knows what you find attractive? So who is this mystery person?

BekensteinsMonster: Just a girl I had a crush on back on Mindoir.

PolinitziTsarina: Nice. Two outer colony bumpkins making googly eyes at each other. She's not related to you is she? Like a cousin or something? That's how these things work on those colonies, right? Arranged marriages and organized breeding programs?

BekensteinsMonster: Actually we only do that if you fail to get married or have a kid by the time you reach thirty.

PolinitziTsarina: [Unintelligible] Really?

BekensteinsMonster: No, dumbass.

PolinitziTsarina: Well how am I supposed to know? So this girl? She got a name? She in the military too?

BekensteinsMonster: Klara, and no. She's attending uni on Benning.

PolinitziTsarina: That's a bit of a long distance relationship you got going there.

BekensteinsMonster: I know, but we're not even dating. Just...
[Unintelligible] I don't know.

PolinitziTsarina: Probably best that way. Those sort of things never last. My high school relationship didn't survive college and we were

both on Earth.

BekensteinsMonster: I guess, but it's definitely worth a shot.

PolinitziTsarina: If you say so. So... [Unintelligible] is she pretty?

BekensteinsMonster: Beautiful. And so smart and sweet and kind and funny. She's amazing.

PolinitziTsarina: Uh, okay. You said you had a crush on this girl, right? She's not your ex?

BekensteinsMonster: Yeah, why?

PolinitziTsarina: [Unintelligible] Well, not trying to rain on your parade, but it sounds like you're idealizing her.

BekensteinsMonster: [Unintelligible] You don't even know her.

PolinitziTsarina: I'm just warning you. These things never turn out the way you think. Trust me.

BekensteinsMonster: And that doesn't mean you shouldn't try.

PolinitziTsarina: Fair enough. If she's as amazing as you say you might have competition with people who are closer to her than you are. Someone that can be there when she needs them.

BekensteinsMonster: [Unintelligible] Is everything okay?

PolinitziTsarina: Why wouldn't it be?

BekensteinsMonster: Because you're acting all weird on me. Being serious. You never act serious.

PolinitziTsarina: No I'm not. Just trying to give you some advice. Take it or leave it, Elvis.

BekensteinsMonster: [Unintelligible] Thanks, I guess.

PolinitziTsarina: Relax. I'm sure you and this Klarochka will fall madly in love, have a fairy tale romance like in the vids, and have lots and lots of babies as part of an outer colony breeding program.

BekensteinsMonster: It's Klara, and I'd like to get past the whole being nervous when I'm talking to her part before I even begin thinking about stuff like that.

PolinitziTsarina: Good to know you haven't lost all of your dorky qualities. I have to run now. My time in the flight sims is coming up and I need to do some prep work.

BekensteinsMonster: Okay. I'm glad we cleared this up. Well, sort of. Good luck with your training and take care, Anna.

PolinitziTsarina: Thanks! I will! Let me know how things are at Czarnobog. And feel free to send me holos. Mostly of yourself.

BekensteinsMonster: So you can use them in pranks? Not going to happen.

PolinitziTsarina: Well I was thinking more for my personal enjoyment, but that works too. Take care, Luis.

BekensteinsMonster: Bye, Anna.

PolinitziTsarina: [Offline]

BekensteinsMonster: [Offline]

* * *

><p>[\ Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein [to] Galen M Kemp [A] Arc Pub Arcturus \] [\ 2572-12-08 \]

[\ Knock it off with bugging Anna about the holo before I kick your ass. Also, how are you, C-Urchin? Hope all is well. \]

[\ Galen M Kemp [A] Arc Pub Arcturus [to] Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein \] [\ 2572-12-08 \]

[\ It's a damn shame that a grown woman can't fight her own battles and has to send a small child to die defending her name. Come at me. I will make your death quick and painless. \]

[\ Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein [to] Galen M Kemp [A] Arc Pub Arcturus \] [\ 2572-12-08 \]

[\ Just stop mentioning it, okay? We had a talk and cleared some stuff up. She's a bit ticked off that other people know about it and you're not helping every time you remind her. \]

[\ Galen M Kemp [A] Arc Pub Arcturus [to] Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein \] [\ 2572-12-08 \]

[\ Oh. So you found some courage and asked her about it, Elvis? Nice. I'll stop cock blocking the two of you. \]

[\ Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein [to] Galen M Kemp [A] Arc Pub Arcturus \] [\ 2572-12-08 \]

[\ You're not blocking anything. Drop it. How's your trip? Mine is boring as fucking hell aside from the usual distractions. \]

[\ Galen M Kemp [A] Arc Pub Arcturus [to] Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein \] [\ 2572-12-08 \]

[\ Captain Cosmic not doing it anymore? Sucks to be you. I am totally hooking up with this beautiful businesswoman headed to Terra Nova. She's married and insatiable. Interesting fact, individual sleep bays

are more than capable of accommodating two people in various configurations. \]

[\ Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein [to] Galen M Kemp [A] Arc Pub Arcturus \] [\ 2572-12-08 \]

[\ A married woman? Seriously? Was this an all female transport with no extranet access? Is her omnitool broken? Because the only way I can understand a successful and beautiful woman sleeping with you is if she had no alternatives. Or she must be desperate and have low standards. And even then her hand probably has a better chance of getting her off. \]

[\ Galen M Kemp [A] Arc Pub Arcturus [to] Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein \] [\ 2572-12-08 \]

[\ Well, if you must know, aside from my obvious rugged handsomeness, sharp wit, and dazzling charm, she was really turned by the uniform. This thing works wonders. \]

[\ Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein [to] Galen M Kemp [A] Arc Pub Arcturus \] [\ 2572-12-08 \]

[\ It sort of does by definition if it's getting you laid. I've seen studlier volus. \]

[\ Galen M Kemp [A] Arc Pub Arcturus [to] Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein \] [\ 2572-12-08 \]

[\ I don't need to know about your porn habits, freak. Now, it's been nice catching up and all, but the lady awaits. Entertain yourself while the adults are busy. \]

\ Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein [to] Galen M Kemp [A] Arc Pub Arcturus \] [\ 2572-12-08 \]

[\ I hope her husband tracks you down and breaks your face. Then you'd have an excuse for why you look that way. \]

* * *

><p>[Private Waypoint Vidchat Transcript] [\ 2572-12-08 \]

Username: DiscipleOfThemis [Vivian Soledad Prieto; Identitag: Earth 739117VSP2482]

DiscipleOfThemis [Login] [Online] [Milgrom, Bekenstein, Boltzmann, Serpent Nebula]

Username: BekensteinsMonster [Luis Vincent Shepard; Identitag: Mindoir 847261LVS2554]

BekensteinsMonster [Login] [Online] [Interstellar Comm Buoy 67-33, Arcturus-Izanagi Corridor, Arcturus Stream]

BekensteinsMonster: Hi Abuela.

DiscipleOfThemis: Mijo! I am terribly sorry that I haven't been able to contact you until now. Is this a bad time? Where are you right

now?

BekensteinsMonster: It's fine. I'm still in slipspace. Headed towards Amaterasu now. How is everything?

DiscipleOfThemis: [Unintelligible] Very trying. I'm not even sure why they bothered to have me look this over. It's almost a waste of my time.

BekensteinsMonster: So it's real? She's guilty? I saw some stuff on the feeds and vids about how everyone is distancing themselves from her already.

DiscipleOfThemis: Well I've only gone over some of Nashan's documents and records, but it's not looking good for anyone involved. It doesn't help that her party is having a bit of a mutiny to oust her behind the scenes. It feels like I am talking to a new person in charge every few hours.

BekensteinsMonster: I saw something about that. Her deputy Menneau and some guy from Shanxi named Saracino are working together to backstab her, right?

DiscipleOfThemis: Working together is a relative term. They have similar goals. Both want her gone so they can take over the party. They'll turn on each other soon enough.

BekensteinsMonster: [Unintelligible] I hate politicians.

DiscipleOfThemis: Are those your true thoughts speaking, or a bit of cabin fever and stir crazy bleeding through?

BekensteinsMonster: A little of both. We only had a two hour layover at Arcturus and that's all anyone could talk about there. Well besides that URF terrorist guy being found guilty.

DiscipleOfThemis: Yes, the conviction of a wanted terrorist who killed hundreds is a footnote on Arcturus when there is juicy political intrigue afoot. That about sums up my experience dealing with those types today.

BekensteinsMonster: Sounds like you're just as sick of politicians as I am, abuela.

DiscipleOfThemis: Well then I have a welcome change of topic for us both.

BekensteinsMonster: What?

DiscipleOfThemis: One moment. Let me call your sisters.

BekensteinsMonster: [Unintelligible] Okay.

DiscipleOfThemis: Have you talked to them since you left Earth?

BekensteinsMonster: No.

DiscipleOfThemis: Forget or just being lazy?

BekensteinsMonster: Neither. I contacted Bisabuela not too long after I boarded. You can imagine how that went.

DiscipleOfThemis: Mijo thank you for doing that. No one ever calls her or sends a message.

BekensteinsMonster: I wonder why?

DiscipleOfThemis: [Unintelligible] It's one step forward, two steps back with the three of you. I swear my actual kids were never this bad.

BekensteinsMonster: Yeah, well there are some things even a UNSC Marine finds intolerable. Like talking with that woman for extended periods of time.

Username: BioticBaroness [Araceli Lindsay Shepard; Identitag: Mindoir 397930ALS2558]

BioticBaroness [Login] [Online] [Sargasso, Bekenstein, Boltzmann, Serpent Nebula]

BioticBaroness: Hello?

DiscipleOfThemis: Mija? Where is your sister? Why is she not answering her omnitool?

BioticBaroness: In the pool. Want me to get her?

DiscipleOfThemis: Please.

BioticBaroness: Hold on. Lizzy! Hey! Bubble butt! Quit pretending you're a hanar princess and answer your omni! Nana is calling!

DiscipleOfThemis: Araceli...

BekensteinsMonster: Nice. I didn't need my eardrums.

BioticBaroness: Oh. Hey Luis. What's up?

BekensteinsMonster: Nice to see you too, brat. I'm trying not to use my biotics to amuse myself on this transport.

BioticBaroness: Always a good idea.

DiscipleOfThemis: Please don't. I don't think we have the credits or clout to get you out of those charges.

Username: LizLuvsLaw [Elizabeth Magdalena Shepard; Identitag: Luna 179977EMS2550]

LizLuvsLaw [Login] [Online] [Sargasso, Bekenstein, Boltzmann, Serpent Nebula]

LizLuvsLaw: [Unintelligible] Nana?

DiscipleOfThemis: Hello dear. I hope we're not interrupting

anything?

LizLuvsLaw: Sorry I was swimming some laps.

BioticBaroness: She's gotta put in work to keep that ass at normal human proportions.

LizLuvsLaw: Shut your mouth, you skinny twerp.

BioticBaroness: What's that? I couldn't hear you over the sounds of your footsteps, gargantua.

DiscipleOfThemis: Knock it off. All of you. My nerves are shot after dealing with supposed adults behaving like children all day. I don't have the patience to deal with the three of you now.

BekensteinsMonster: But I didn't say anything.

DiscipleOfThemis: Zip it.

BioticBaroness: But we're in a vidchat.

DiscipleOfThemis: What did I just say? [Unintelligible] That wasn't an invitation to use hand gestures, Araceli.

BioticBaroness: You should totally be more clear about that next time.

BekensteinsMonster: So, uh, what was the thing you wanted to tell me?

DiscipleOfThemis: Elizabeth?

LizLuvsLaw: Oh, uhm. Right. [Unintelligible] So, brother, I have a proposition for you.

BekensteinsMonster: Let me save you some time. No. I don't care. Not even if you threaten me.

BioticBaroness: Oh! Is this about buying land on Mindoir again?

BekensteinsMonster: Say what?

LizLuvsLaw: I swear mom and dad adopted the two of you from the Attican Circus. Well since you seem to want to do all the talking have at it.

DiscipleOfThemis: How about we stick to the subject? Have you been following any of the news about Mindoir lately?

BekensteinsMonster: Not really. I saw something about the effort for a second wave of colonization being restarted.

DiscipleOfThemis: That's the one.

BekensteinsMonster: How does that apply to us?

LizLuvsLaw: I was talking with a friend and I think I can get us back

into business on Mindoir.

BekensteinsMonster: Are you guys serious? Really? Why? How come you're changing your minds now?

LizLuvsLaw: [Unintelligible] It doesn't matter.

BioticBaroness: Nana has been bitching her out since we all learned she went behind our backs to sell the family property.

DiscipleOfThemis: Ari! Language! And I did no such thing. I merely impressed upon your sister the importance of doing the right thing while also being wise in her choices.

LizLuvsLaw: The point is that we can do this. That is if you and Ari are really serious about this. I mean it. Not just some childish tantrums or wishful thinking, but really investing ourselves in this. Do you guys want to restart the family business?

BekensteinsMonster: Abuela?

DiscipleOfThemis: I think it will be healthy for the three of you to have a family identity away from the rest of us. Something that is uniquely your own. A place you can call home and a source of income you can rely upon.

BioticBaroness: I still don't understand. Would we have to live there?

BekensteinsMonster: Yeah, how does that work? I tried looking into getting my citizenship transferred back to Mindoir and there are some strict requirements.

DiscipleOfThemis: You did?

BekensteinsMonster: Uh, yeah. Sorry I didn't talk it over with you.

DiscipleOfThemis: Luis, it's fine. You're an adult now. You're allowed to make decisions for yourself. I just don't want you to go to the opposite extreme and not talk things over with people who can help you or give you advice.

BekensteinsMonster: Okay.

BioticBaroness: Uh, hello? What are the requirements?

LizLuvsLaw: No offworld title holders or primary investment holders. You have to be an approved citizen of Mindoir, which means you have to pass the colonization process. Purchase a plot of land with the accompanying licenses for authorized activity on the planet. Since it's primarily agriculture and ranching they want done on Mindoir, that's where the glut of the licenses are going. There are a few licenses for owning and operating services or other businesses, but those are usually tied up in bids.

DiscipleOfThemis: More likely back room deals without VIs.

BekensteinsMonster: Right. So you have to be an actual colonist living there full time. That sort of rules us out.

DiscipleOfThemis: Not quite. There are ways around it if you're creative enough.

LizLuvsLaw: And happen to have someone in the family who has extraordinary circumstances that prevent them from being present.

BioticBaroness: Like what?

LizLuvsLaw: Like being active duty UNSC.

BekensteinsMonster: Uh... [Unintelligible]

LizLuvsLaw: So are the two of you interested?

BioticBaroness: I guess. I mean, I'm not too keen on ever going back after everything that happened, but it sounds like we're just going to have the place in name only. And it's not even going to be in my name.

DiscipleOfThemis: Actually, your brother would be primary title holder to work around some of the laws and get you through the application process. You and Lizzy would be part owners without citizenship. Once all of you are of age you can work out the details.

BekensteinsMonster: And what does Abuelo think about this?

DiscipleOfThemis: He knows better than to insert himself, or his opinions, in matters that do not concern him. This is your choice.

BioticBaroness: Oh, so that explains why you two have been frosty with each other. [Unintelligible] I thought it was because of that elcor faced skank throwing herself all over him at that dinner party you guys had.

DiscipleOfThemis: Araceli, I love you. You're my precious and vivacious granddaughter, so I'm going to say this in the nicest way possible. Stop talking.

BioticBaroness: What? I didn't say anything bad.

LizLuvsLaw: The absence of anything bad does not infer the presence of something good.

BioticBaroness: You should know. Bet that's what most people say when you leave a room.

LizLuvsLaw: Stunted, scrawny, and stupid is no way to go through life, hermana.

BekensteinsMonster: As fascinating as this is, I'm burning up credits on a slipstream connection.

DiscipleOfThemis: I concur. I'm working on a migraine and your bratty

bickering is not helping things.

LizLuvsLaw: So, what do you say, Luis? Are you really serious about getting back into business on Mindoir?

BekensteinsMonster: Yeah.

LizLuvsLaw: Good. I already made the arrangements. Just needed to make sure you and Ari were on board before I finalized it.

BioticBaroness: You did this without asking us? Again?

LizLuvsLaw: Not the point.

BekensteinsMonster: It actually is but whatever. You think you know what's best for all of us.

DiscipleOfThemis: I was the one who encouraged your sister to do it this way. Think of it as a gift and repayment for her previous lack of judgment.

BekensteinsMonster: Fine. What have you got?

LizLuvsLaw: Well, as you noted earlier, the investment groups have prodded the Systems Alliance to issue some funding for second wave colonization. After the raid they just couldn't get people to voluntarily move there. So in order for the local Mindoir government to get that funding, they have to comply with some new regulations and stipulations about the colonization process.

BioticBaroness: Gee, and to think all it took was a bloodbath and people being taken into slavery.

BekensteinsMonster: They still haven't addressed the issues about security and defense. What are they playing at?

DiscipleOfThemis: Credits. It's what makes the galaxy work. But whatever the motives are for everyone involved the three of you can take advantage of this.

LizLuvsLaw: Do you two remember my friend Ingrid?

BekensteinsMonster: Yes. Yes I do.

BioticBaroness: You mean the one that wore the thin bodysuit all the time?

LizLuvsLaw: Plenty of people wear stuff like that!

BekensteinsMonster: That thing was so thin it might as well have been transparent.

BioticBaroness: She was like a human weather report. When she would show up in the morning before school I could always tell how cold it was outside by seeing how hard her nipples were and if she had goosebumps.

LizLuvsLaw: Whatever. Long story short, she survived the raid and is working for the Mindoir government. She gave me a heads up on land and mineral rights being up for sale.

BioticBaroness: Wonder how she got that job?

BekensteinsMonster: Do you think they make her wear a uniform?

BioticBaroness: We can only hope. No one wants to know how she grooms herself.

DiscipleOfThemis: I can't believe the two of you are this judgmental about how someone dresses. You should be ashamed of yourselves.

BioticBaroness: Normally I wouldn't care, but who would ever forget the girl who kept trying to sleep with dad?

BekensteinsMonster: Pretty sure Mom was going to slap the taste out of her mouth that one time she offered to give dad a massage.

LizLuvsLaw: Pretty sure you were too busy drooling over her like some little perv whenever she came over to even know what was going on.

BekensteinsMonster: I did not.

BioticBaroness: Did too.

BekensteinsMonster: Did not. Besides, Lizzy tried dressing like her too.

LizLuvsLaw: I did not!

BioticBaroness: You're right. Every time she would try to dress like Ingrid, mom would give her this look and she'd whine about it being unfair before changing.

LizLuvsLaw: That was the fashion on Mindoir! It's too damn hot and humid there to be wearing thick clothes all the time!

BioticBaroness: Funny. I don't remember mom wearing a bodysuit like that to work.

DiscipleOfThemis: This conversation has taken I turn into the gutter that I really should have expected. Move it along.

LizLuvsLaw: Ingrid is a bit more... [Unintelligible] free spirited, than most.

BioticBaroness: She was free with a lot of things.

BekensteinsMonster: There was always a weird mix of people on Mindoir, but she sort of stood out. That's saying something.

LizLuvsLaw: Well, when there's really nothing else to do there people entertain themselves.

BioticBaroness: That's code for she liked sleeping with other people's significant others.

BekensteinsMonster: Didn't Old Man Sprague used to always try to talk to her?

LizLuvsLaw: And? That creepy old bastard did that to anything with breasts and a pulse.

BioticBaroness: No kidding. The way he would look at you or mom was just gross.

LizLuvsLaw: You never heard the things he said. The geriatric bastard swore he was charming.

BekensteinsMonster: Another reason to kill him if I ever see him again.

DiscipleOfThemis: [Unintelligible] While this morbid and frankly disturbing trip down memory lane is fascinating the migraine pounding away at the inside of my skull is telling me that the nootropics and analgesics are not going to be enough to deal with this topic. Take pity on your grandmother and move it along please.

BekensteinsMonster: Sorry.

BioticBaroness: We'll stop.

LizLuvsLaw: Right. Moving along. So, any questions so far? About purchasing land on Mindoir again?

BekensteinsMonster: What happened to our farm?

BioticBaroness: You would want to live there? In the exact same spot where our parents died?

BekensteinsMonster: No. Just curious what happened to it.

LizLuvsLaw: Even if we wanted it they're buying the local farms like ours out. Part of the colonization effort is dependent upon expanding population centers like Nouveau Basel. Something about the funding tied to increased UNSC presence which in turn requires population thresholds. So our farm is going to be paved over and turned into a part of town. The farms are being moved further out and inland.

BekensteinsMonster: I see. So they are going to get a permanent UNSC presence, but only if enough people move there?

DiscipleOfThemis: Welcome to politics.

BioticBaroness: Welcome to how assholes operate. So does that mean our old farm is already gone?

LizLuvsLaw: Yeah. From what I gather the block of farms we were in is

going to be the site of a new school.

BekensteinsMonster: Why even have the farms there in the first place if they knew they were going to do this?

LizLuvsLaw: Colonization planning. They probably didn't anticipate the colony exploding in population so quickly so they allowed the first phase to be tight population centers.

DiscipleOfThemis: [Unintelligible] They typically do that to keep costs down on infrastructure and local administration for colonies when they're starting. But the plan is always to allow the colonies to be easily expandable. They're just pushing the timetable for Mindoir forward by several decades.

BioticBaroness: So where would we get a new farm?

LizLuvsLaw: Winery, and on Nouveau Ufenau Island.

BekensteinsMonster: [Unintelligible] I'm sorry. A what on what?

LizLuvsLaw: Winery on Nouveau Ufenau Island.

BioticBaroness: Isn't that the place mom would take us for picnics and hiking?

BekensteinsMonster: Yeah, I thought Nouveau Ufenau Island was some protected refuge?

LizLuvsLaw: It isn't anymore. Part of the new wave of colonization is opening up new locations and we're getting first crack at it.

BekensteinsMonster: But we don't know anything about wine.

LizLuvsLaw: I know I like drinking it.

DiscipleOfThemis: Always a good place to start.

BekensteinsMonster: Pretty sure we need to know more than that. It's like saying since you like eating you should start a farm.

DiscipleOfThemis: Your mother and father knew nothing about farming when they moved to Mindoir. You can learn.

BioticBaroness: But how? If we're not going to actually live there? Is everything going to be run by VIs and automatics?

LizLuvsLaw: Not exactly, but pretty close. We're setting up a lot of automation and paying locals to assist. Ingrid is checking out to see if there is anyone interested.

BioticBaroness: Wonderful. I can just imagine the sort of people that are going to be saying yes to her vetting process.

BekensteinsMonster: So let me get this straight. We're just going to own the land and the winery in my name, but let others handle it?

LizLuvsLaw: Sounds about right.

BioticBaroness: Is that legal?

DiscipleOfThemis: That's where your brother's status as active duty helps. We can make the case that he presents a special circumstance.

LizLuvsLaw: The fact you're a Mindoir native helps. Most everyone on Konstantestar will approve the application for a legacy.

BekensteinsMonster: Okay, say this goes through? And then what?

LizLuvsLaw: I'm glad you asked. I'm sending the two of you a packet of files of research I've asked our cousin Saman do. Holos and vids of the different locations we can purchase on the island. Basic surveys about the terrain for each. Urban planning maps. Then some basic ideas I managed to put together about what can be done with these opportunities.

[File Transfer Request] [File Transfer Downloading] [File Transfer Complete]

BekensteinsMonster: Wait. What else? I thought we were just getting back in business on Mindoir? You guys want to do more?

LizLuvsLaw: Absolutely. They're opening up the entire solar system. We can purchase some of the mineral rights and set up contracts with the larger resource mining and refining corporations. Then there is the expansion of the town itself. There will be a lot of opportunities to invest in new businesses or old ones looking to expand. If we plan this right we can make a freighter load of credits.

BioticBaroness: Now this really sounds illegal.

BekensteinsMonster: Right? Are Ingrid and Saman allowed to give us all this information?

DiscipleOfThemis: Perfectly legal. Those rules are more like guidelines when you have the right connections. We just happen to know people involved in the process of handing out contracts and approving applications.

BioticBaroness: Yeah, none of that sounds legal.

BekensteinsMonster: And you're sure we won't be ripped off or get in trouble?

LizLuvsLaw: Between me and Nana? Hardly. We just have to make sure we don't get too greedy that it becomes blatantly obvious. Keep it small and simple. Take advantage of this opportunity and reap the rewards.

DiscipleOfThemis: That's my girl. This is a wonderful investment opportunity for the three of you.

BioticBaroness: How are we paying for this? I thought the money from the sale of the farm was tied up in trust funds?

DiscipleOfThemis: After some heated debate, your grandfather and I have agreed to help the three of you with this. Think of it as our gifts to you to help you start out your lives.

BioticBaroness: [Unintelligible] I would have preferred a skycar, but whatever.

LizLuvsLaw: It's the way the galaxy works. You two made a big deal about this and I managed to pull some strings. So let's do this already.

BekensteinsMonster: [Unintelligible] All of these properties are next to the shore.

BioticBaroness: Really?

BekensteinsMonster: Yeah, like right on the beach.

LizLuvsLaw: I know! A friend of mine let me use his drafting VI and I want to show you some of the designs I thought up of creating a manor on the island.

BekensteinsMonster: [Unintelligible] What?

DiscipleOfThemis: This is news to me. Just who might this friend be?

LizLuvsLaw: Uh, no one you know.

BioticBaroness: Ten credits says she's sleeping with him.

LizLuvsLaw: Shut up.

DiscipleOfThemis: We'll talk later about this, Elizabeth, but resources are resources. What have you got?

LizLuvsLaw: That island is perfect for setting up as a vacation place. For all of us. We can go and relax there anytime we want.

[File Transfer Request] [File Transfer Downloading] [File Transfer Complete]

BekensteinsMonster: Right. We're going to own a manor. On the beach. With a winery. That's something I can safely say I never anticipated. Ever.

LizLuvsLaw: Don't be such a whiner. There are lots of really great perks associated with this.

BioticBaroness: Like owning your own manor that also produces wine?

LizLuvsLaw: Bingo. I can't wait until they begin shipping me my own supply.

DiscipleOfThemis: I do hope you're considerate of your dear old grandmother and her role in helping you secure this opportunity.

LizLuvsLaw: Don't worry. There will be a shipment with your name on it too.

DiscipleOfThemis: And like that my concerns disappear.

LizLuvsLaw: It's going to be great!

BioticBaroness: Still would prefer the skycar. Just saying.

DiscipleOfThemis: Your less than subtle hints about wanting your own skycar have been noted.

BioticBaroness: Should I go tell Tata? I can use the sad eyes and quivering lip routine.

BekensteinsMonster: I suppose I could get used to having someplace with a warm beach to visit when I'm on leave.

DiscipleOfThemis: Or take a special someone to.

BekensteinsMonster: Uh, no offense Abuela, but I would never bring someone I was dating near the rest of you.

LizLuvsLaw: I'm patient. I will pay you back for all the times you tormented me in front of my boyfriends.

BioticBaroness: First he has to learn how to talk to girls before he can get a girlfriend.

BekensteinsMonster: Fuck off.

DiscipleOfThemis: Luis! Language!

BekensteinsMonster: [Unintelligible] Sorry.

LizLuvsLaw: He's not that hopeless. What was that one girl on Mindoir that he kept pining over? The Palinkas girl?

BioticBaroness: Klara.

LizLuvsLaw: That's the one. She was kinda into him. In a pitying kind of way. So it's not entirely out of the realm of possibility that he could have a woman interested in him.

BioticBaroness: But the second he opens his mouth they'd lose all interest.

LizLuvsLaw: There is that. Whatever happened to her?

BekensteinsMonster: [Unintelligible] She's alive.

LizLuvsLaw: How do you know? Have you've talked to her?

BioticBaroness: Aww he did! He's going red in the face! [Unintelligible] Wait! That's who you were gossiping with!

DiscipleOfThemis: Since we're on the topic of tormenting your brother over his love interests, should I even things out by discussing your equally pathetic love lives?

LizLuvsLaw: [Unintelligible] Uh, no. I'm good.

BioticBaroness: Same here.

BekensteinsMonster: What happened?

BioticBaroness: Nothing.

DiscipleOfThemis: Only that boy Araceli was interested in has declined her invitations to attend the school dances. Now he's told her to stop asking and leave him alone.

BioticBaroness: Nana! You said you weren't going to tell anyone!

DiscipleOfThemis: And I distinctly remember those conditions being dependent upon you being nicer to your brother and sister.

LizLuvsLaw: Would you look at that? Time flies. I have to go.

BekensteinsMonster: What did she do?

DiscipleOfThemis: Let's just say my intuition leads me to believe her friend with the drafting VI is married.

LizLuvsLaw: [Unintelligible] Bye.

****LizLuvsLaw: [Offline]****

BioticBaroness: Wow.

BekensteinsMonster: You'd think she'd know better considering she saw what doing something like that did to our parents' marriage.

DiscipleOfThemis: Sometimes the heart wants what the heart wants. I just hope she doesn't fool herself into thinking he's going to leave his wife for her.

BioticBaroness: Sometimes the crotch wants what the crotch wants.

DiscipleOfThemis: Do we want to talk about what I know has been happening in my conservatories? Something about boys and your biotics?

BioticBaroness: [Unintelligible] Shit.

BekensteinsMonster: Wow. So instead of listening to this awkwardly hilarious conversation about the sexual activity of my sisters, I'm going to review these files. Have a great night, everyone. Or day. Whatever. Love you lots. Bye.

****BekensteinsMonster: [Offline]****

BioticBaroness: [Unintelligible] Am I in trouble?

DiscipleOfThemis: No, but you really need to be more discreet and careful. I won't lecture you about being sexually active because I think you're mature enough to begin handling your own affairs. But that means being responsible, including how you use your biotics. We've had this discussion before about using your biotics when you're emotional. The last thing I want to have to deal with is explaining how you injured some boy with your biotics while making out or having sex. [Unintelligible] Unfortunately, I can't say the same about your grandfather should he find out. And you're pushing your luck on that front with your boldness.

BioticBaroness: Okay.

DiscipleOfThemis: And you better think about that when you start dropping hints you want a skycar. You can safely bet on just where his mind will go when he imagines what you're going to be doing in it.

BioticBaroness: Ugh. Okay. I get it.

DiscipleOfThemis: Now I have to go and get some rest. No doubt these paranoid executives at Nashan and the savages in Terra Firma will be calling me tomorrow morning the second they think it's socially acceptable.

BioticBaroness: Okay. Love you Nana.

DiscipleOfThemis: I love you, too. I'll probably be here again all day tomorrow. Be good.

BioticBaroness: I will.

DiscipleOfThemis: And safe.

BioticBaroness: Got it. Bye.

****BioticBaroness [Offline]****

****DiscipleOfThemis [Offline]****

* * *

><p>Extranet Records [\ 2572-12-09 \]

[Search Term] Mindoir colonization application process active duty military

[Search Term] Legacy citizenship

[Search Term] Nouveau Ufenau Island Mindoir Malawi

[Search Term] Wine production

[Search Term] Mindoir Harvest Records

[Search Term] Mindoir colonization application agricultural status

[Search Term] Galactic wine sales

[Download] Citadel Charter laws and regulations on exporting and importing alcoholic and hallucinogenic beverages

[Search Term] Galactic chocolate sales

[Search Term] Galactic cheese sales

* * *

><p>[\ Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein [to] Elizabeth M Shepard [to] Sarg Bekenstein \] [\ 2572-12-09 \]

[\ Hey, Liz. After our talk I killed some time looking into things. I came up with a couple of other ideas on what else we could do to diversify. [Tap to download file] Let me know what you think. \]

[\ Elizabeth M Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein [to] Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein \] [\ 2572-12-10 \]

[\ Sorry for getting back to you so late. This is brilliant. You've really outdone yourself. Let me run this by Nana and Ari to see what they think but in my opinion we have a winner for our primary investment. We can have the applications filed with the CAA and Mindoir before the end of the year. Great job, hermano. We're going to be so rich! \]

* * *

><p>[\ App Admin [A] UI Ily Elysium [to] Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein \] [\ 2572-12-10 \]

[\ Thank you Luis for your interest in higher education with the University of Illyria, the number one choice for remote studies among spacers, colonists, and military personnel throughout Systems Alliance space!

After reviewing your application packet, verifying your civilian education records, and confirming your private tuition bonus with the UNSC we have approved your application. Welcome to the University of Illyria!

We concur that your choice of entering our Distance Learning For The Deployed program is the correct one and applaud your willingness to not wait until you have left the service of humanity to further your education. We have worked diligently with the UNSC and Systems Alliance to produce a challenging curriculum that works well with the time constraints of humanity's finest stationed across the galaxy. We have no doubt you will rise to the challenge of graduating with an advanced degree just as you have risen to the challenge of completing

your military training.

We have forwarded your application and student file to the Distance Learning For The Deployed office. A VI from that office will contact you within [4] [Terran] business days to finalize your enrollment. Until that time we encourage you to review the available courses of study to find the one that appeals to you. We also provide a round the clock VI service that helps you determine which degrees translate best to your current MVC designation so that you can maximize your potential in uniform or when you take your skills into the private sector as a veteran.

Please take your time as the final admission process is not time sensitive. We understand and greatly appreciate the demands you are under as a member of humanity's fighting force.

We at the University of Illyria look forward to embarking on this next step in your development as a highly skilled member of the UNSC. Thank you for your service. Defend Earth. Defend Humanity.

Best Regards and Continued Success,

Jimena Coronel, Assistant Director, Applications Office, University of Illyria; University of Illyria Records VI 6-37 \]

* * *

><p>Extranet Records [\ 2572-12-10 \]

[Search Term] D81 Condor military shuttle

[Search Term] D81 Condor military shuttle amenities

[Search Term] Commercial transports between Izanagi and Borvo systems

[Search Term] Available seating between Amaterasu and Sirona

[Search Term] Is there a reason the UNSC uses a Condor instead of a commercial transport?

[Search Term] UNSC Second Fleet Spacelift Command

[Search Term] UNSC Second Fleet Spacelift Command scheduled trips between Izanagi and Borvo systems

[Search Term] Is there a reason the UNSC insists on doing things the hard way?

[Search Term] Distance between Izanagi and Borvo systems

[Search Term] D81 Condor military shuttle FTL speeds

[Search Term] Ways to kill time

[Search Term] Ways to kill a lot of time

[Purchase] Galaxy of Fantasy [30] day subscription

[Download] Galaxy of Fantasy Turian Gravelites Soldier strategy

guide

* * *

><p>[\ Luis V Shepard 5923 LS 2826 [A] UNSC Marines Mil [to] Anna S Vasilyeva 4883 AV 9066 [A] UNSC AF Mil \]

[\ Anna save me. \]

[\ Anna S Vasilyeva 4883 AV 9066 [A] UNSC AF Mil [to] Luis V Shepard 5923 LS 2826 [A] UNSC Marines Mil \]

[\ Why are you using the military waypoint system, Luis? \]

[\ Luis V Shepard 5923 LS 2826 [A] UNSC Marines Mil [to] Anna S Vasilyeva 4883 AV 9066 [A] UNSC AF Mil \]

[\ It's the only network I can connect to right now. \]

[\ Anna S Vasilyeva 4883 AV 9066 [A] UNSC AF Mil [to] Luis V Shepard 5923 LS 2826 [A] UNSC Marines Mil \]

[\ Where are you? \]

[\ Luis V Shepard 5923 LS 2826 [A] UNSC Marines Mil [to] Anna S Vasilyeva 4883 AV 9066 [A] UNSC AF Mil \]

[\ On my way to Czarnobog. Why the hell does the UNSC bother with using condors? \]

[\ Anna S Vasilyeva 4883 AV 9066 [A] UNSC AF Mil [to] Luis V Shepard 5923 LS 2826 [A] UNSC Marines Mil \]

[\ I haven't done much FTL stuff outside of theory so far, but I know those shuttles are pretty efficient for transporting small amounts of personnel and cargo over short distances. Not the most glamorous things in the UNSC arsenal but displacement in the slipstream is partially related to how powerful a mass effect field a vessel can create and maintain. Why? Are you on one? \]

[\ Luis V Shepard 5923 LS 2826 [A] UNSC Marines Mil [to] Anna S Vasilyeva 4883 AV 9066 [A] UNSC AF Mil \]

[\ I understood none of what you just said. I'm stuck on a condor shuttle from Amaterasu to Czarnobog. Explain this in simpler terms a farm boy could understand. \]

[\ Anna S Vasilyeva 4883 AV 9066 [A] UNSC AF Mil [to] Luis V Shepard 5923 LS 2826 [A] UNSC Marines Mil \]

[\ Ouch. I've heard about those sort of services. To warrant the costs in fuel it usually means the shuttle needs be packed fully. My guess is they had something to pick up from Amaterasu that didn't warrant sending a full sized vessel. So some admin with the Air Force or DCS probably figured since they had the shuttle already there they'd stuff the rest of you in there to maximize the efficiency and costs. So I take it that it's full? \]

[\ Luis V Shepard 5923 LS 2826 [A] UNSC Marines Mil [to] Anna S Vasilyeva 4883 AV 9066 [A] UNSC AF Mil \]

[\\ Yes. Crates stacked to the ceiling and thirty passengers. This is worse than the tether elevators during harvest season. \\]

[\\ Anna S Vasilyeva 4883 AV 9066 [A] UNSC AF Mil [to] Luis V Shepard 5923 LS 2826 [A] UNSC Marines Mil \\]

[\\ Is that reference supposed to make sense to me, colony boy? \\]

[\\ Luis V Shepard 5923 LS 2826 [A] UNSC Marines Mil [to] Anna S Vasilyeva 4883 AV 9066 [A] UNSC AF Mil \\]

[\\ This thing is like a pelican only less comfortable. I didn't know that was possible. And now with the crates you can't even stretch your legs out. Then there's the issue with the restroom. \\]

[\\ Anna S Vasilyeva 4883 AV 9066 [A] UNSC AF Mil [to] Luis V Shepard 5923 LS 2826 [A] UNSC Marines Mil \\]

[\\ What's the issue? At least it has one. Try putting in eight hours in a kodiak or pelican and get back to me about having to hold it. \\]

[\\ Luis V Shepard 5923 LS 2826 [A] UNSC Marines Mil [to] Anna S Vasilyeva 4883 AV 9066 [A] UNSC AF Mil \\]

[\\ There's only one. For over thirty people. For over twenty hours. They've turned off the artificial gravity systems. And I'm positive someone on here ate something that does not agree with them. \\]

[\\ Anna S Vasilyeva 4883 AV 9066 [A] UNSC AF Mil [to] Luis V Shepard 5923 LS 2826 [A] UNSC Marines Mil \\]

[\\ Ugh. That's just disgusting. Now I'm dreading when I am assigned to a unit. I bet they make the newbies pilot these trips. \\]

[\\ Luis V Shepard 5923 LS 2826 [A] UNSC Marines Mil [to] Anna S Vasilyeva 4883 AV 9066 [A] UNSC AF Mil \\]

[\\ There's zero privacy. I can't even use my omnitool or datapad without the people next to me looking at what I am doing. Not that I'm doing much of anything because, again, no extranet access. \\]

[\\ Anna S Vasilyeva 4883 AV 9066 [A] UNSC AF Mil [to] Luis V Shepard 5923 LS 2826 [A] UNSC Marines Mil \\]

[\\ Well suck it up marine. It'll be over soon. \\]

[\\ Luis V Shepard 5923 LS 2826 [A] UNSC Marines Mil [to] Anna S Vasilyeva 4883 AV 9066 [A] UNSC AF Mil \\]

[\\ Great. The sergeant sitting next to me is reading our conversation. Now he's glaring at me. If you can read this, I'm not trying to be rude, but private conversations are meant to be private for a reason. \\]

[\\ Anna S Vasilyeva 4883 AV 9066 [A] UNSC AF Mil [to] Luis V Shepard 5923 LS 2826 [A] UNSC Marines Mil \\]

[\ Did you actually just do what I think you did? \]

[\ Luis V Shepard 5923 LS 2826 [A] UNSC Marines Mil [to] Anna S Vasilyeva 4883 AV 9066 [A] UNSC AF Mil \]

[\ Apparently Sergeant No Sense Of Humor Busybody is not amused. Save me. \]

16. The Madness Of A Dark God

AN: Undoubtedly many of you will take notice of a few subtle clues regarding Shepard's immediate future from this chapter, but I do hope that I have enough twists and turns prepared to keep you entertained. Or at the very least enough low brow humor.

The point of these next few chapters will be to showcase Shepard's continued growth as he begins to adapt to military life, the pressing responsibilities of being an adult, and the unique opportunities afforded to him. A big theme for Shepard throughout his life will be his self awareness, perceptions, and ability to adapt to change while maintaining the core integrity that makes him who he is. Much of this will come in the form of painful lessons and consequences for his actions.

Again I should stress that I want the world I creating for him to exist in is a conjoined history of Halo and Mass Effect that is very dark and gritty. There are no true heroes or villains. Only ideals and perceptions. It's going to be up to Shep to navigate this mess and realize that doing the right thing doesn't always make him the good guy or a hero.

* * *

><p>Docking Bay 21, Stuhac Station, UNSC Naval Depot Czarnobog, Czarnobog, Andarta, Borvo System, Arcturus Stream Star Cluster; December 11th, 2572 [Standardized Terran Calendar], 0633 [Synced Terran Time, Terran Standard]

The dreary interior of the shuttle was bathed in a harsh brightness as the rear ramp of the DT81 Condor lowered. My eagerness to exit was foiled as I was forced to recoil and lift my hand to shield my eyes as they squinted against the glare. As I blinked away the final spots in my vision I got my first, and ultimately disappointing, glimpse of my first duty station and new home.

The docking bay was a massive structure extending in either direction for what seemed like a hundred meters. A cursory examination was all I needed to come to the conclusion that it must have been built out of an existing cavern system in the cliff face on the lifeless moon Czarnobog. Which I'm sure was impressive under normal circumstances.

But this wasn't normal circumstances. To my beleaguered mind right now it was just another worn down UNSC facility. The same permacrete walls covering everything in solid slabs like some gray cancerous growth. More prefabricated metal fixtures in the form of panels, ramps, launch bay doors, walkways, and cabling adorned every surface. Although, if I squinted a bit more and used my normally overactive

imagination the loading dock looked like it had been built around the fossilized remnants of an ancient metal monstrosity.

Now that I think about it, I wondered why they never include holos or vids of stuff like this in the recruitment ads? Afraid people might reconsider that enlistment if they knew they would be assigned to a place that looked like this?

Completing the setting was a slight chill in the air that was only now beginning to seep into my body and made the crappy conditions of my shuttle seem like a sauna. Yet again I was reminded of the UNSC's propensity for finding places that were freezing cold to build their bases. This was becoming something of a disturbing trend. Either I needed to lower my expectations on places I would visit in my military career or learn to find the brighter side of being someplace miserably cold.

Yeah. The chances of the latter happening are about as likely as me becoming the warlord of a krogan clan. So lowered expectations it is then.

I snorted at my own wit as I joined the rest of the passengers at the processing station. Once in line I dropped my bags to stretch my stiff and sore muscles. As the blood flowed into my numb limbs they awoke with stronger than expected tingles and an uncomfortable humming. My yawn rolled into an annoyed groan as I recognized the now intimately familiar sensation of excess static electricity accumulation in my body.

A wonderful side effect of being too close to the active element zero core of an FTL capable vessel for so long. Toss in the grimy feeling of not having showered or brushed my teeth in over a day, a full bladder putting pressure on my lower abdomen, and I was feeling pretty fucking miserable.

This last leg of my trip certainly wasn't anything I would recall fondly, but in retrospect I really should have expected nothing less given my experiences thus far in the UNSC.

Lowered expectations, Luis.

To start my five day trip between Earth and Amaterasu had been particularly pleasant as far as commercial passenger transports go. There were a few of the typical rude and irritating people you're forced to share close quarters with on trips like that, but they couldn't put a damper on the high I was riding after having completed my training.

The entire trip felt like a physical manifestation of leaving behind my old life as teenage boy running from his troubles and taking the first steps towards becoming my own man. There were just so many new and exciting things going on in my life.

I was officially a UNSC Marine infantryman on my way to my first duty station in a corner of the galaxy that I barely knew existed.

There was the ever present challenge of honing my talents in anticipation of an inevitable ICT invitation.

Finalizing my application for correspondence education and picking my

majors was also weighing upon my mind.

Then there was the prospect of regaining my Mindoir citizenship and restarting the family business. Something I had serious doubts about being possible until a few days ago.

And if I was going to talk about things I could never of imagined in my wildest dreams, there was a real possibility that a beautiful woman was interested in me.

Me. The dorky kid from a Mindoir farm who can barely string together a coherent sentence in the presence of an attractive woman.

And not just any woman. Klara. Sweet, charming, and beautiful Klara. The girl who had occupied my mind and quite a few naughty dreams when I lived on Mindoir. Just thinking about those captivating blue eyes or that dazzling smile could get the head numbing rush of fear and excitement flowing through my body. And that was before my mind went into the gutter and thought about everything she had going on below her neckline.

But I wasn't going to be the same passive and shy person I was before. I knew what I wanted from this opportunity and was willing to do whatever it took to get it. Problem was I wasn't sure how I'd exactly go about pursuing a relationship with her given my circumstances. And even if we were in the same star cluster, distance was certainly an obstacle that I didn't have the time or funds to readily overcome. But I saw it as just another challenge to add to my plate.

Everything considered my prospects were looking brighter than ever. That is until I had found myself disembarking at the orbital station above Amaterasu. With a spring in my step I had made my way to the small UNSC terminal where my positive attitude met the inescapable force of nature that I called UNSC hospitality.

After about twenty minutes of that treatment my mind started to come up with explanations that bordered on conspiracy theory. Like maybe the military was really populated with advanced mechs with VIs programmed to have the least amount of cheerful human social interaction possible. It's the only thing that made sense at this point.

Actually, that the UNSC attracted misanthropes and encouraged people to be miserable assholes to everyone they met made more sense, but I liked my explanation better.

But I hadn't seen anything yet. Once the tiny by interstellar vessel standards transport arrived I couldn't help but groan as I did a quick headcount of the delightful people I'd be sharing this ride with.

I'd seen a DTC81 Condor in vids and holos before. Even had an up close glimpse once during MVC. To my untrained eye it looked like a stretched out DTC77 Pelican. Keenly aware all the fun times I've had riding in one of those, I had desperately hoped the smaller than expected size of my ride belied spacious internal accommodations.

No such luck.

My first view of the inner workings of the Condor had confirmed my fears. It really was little better than an oversized Pelican dropship. The only real differences I could find were a larger capacity for passengers and cargo, a cramped closet they called a restroom, and a food kiosk that you actually had to purchase things from.

Because clearly feeding us would imply they gave a fuck about our well being.

Not that it mattered because there had been no artificial gravity for the duration of the trip. Hello nausea, goodbye appetite.

I couldn't even occupy my time by surfing the extranet because there was no local cache or public external communications possible. Only simple messaging using the military waypoint system which limited my correspondence to Galen, Anna, Finch, Barrera, and my Tio Kamal. Not exactly the most supportive group of people in the galaxy to my plight if their responses were anything to go by.

I suppose I should be happy the UNSC didn't put me in the transport containers they stacked from the floor to the ceiling to save even more on costs.

After the first hour being queasy and stuck seated next to the most humorless sack of shit to ever be given the rank of Sergeant in the UNSC Marines I swore to myself to never complain about taking a bargain commercial transport flight ever again. And that was before someone stunk up the tiny closet of a restroom about halfway through the trip with a bowel movement that could have melted military warship armor.

My sour musings over the drastic change in my fate over the last terran day were cut short when my turn came for processing. I stood in place with my arms raised as a decontamination drone scanned me and my belongings. Once cleared and released I entered the reception area nearby where I removed my dog tags and tapped a designated grounding spot. A thrum of electrical power flowed out of my body as the excess static of my trip was bled off. I closed my eyes in relief and sighed, pleased to have at least one inconvenience gone.

With that out of the way I began looking around for a restroom. When I failed to find any nearby I consulted my omnitool. My initiative was rewarded with an acknowledgment of my omnitool connecting to the Czarnobog network for surveillance purposes only. No privileges and no extranet access. Therefore no assistance in finding a place to take a piss.

Recalling the involuntary nature of my communications blackout aboard the Condor I groaned and looked skyward in frustration. Of course. Why had I expected anything to work in my favor? It's not like the UNSC would do something sensible. Like putting conveniently placed restrooms nearby to where people were disembarking off of their awful transports and shuttles? Making an effort to control my emotions I tried to remind myself of lowered expectations. Just keep repeating it like a mantra and maybe I'll learn to accept it eventually. Maybe.

Then again when you begin to yearn for the friendliness and help of invasive scanners on directory kiosks that tried to sell you crap

based upon personalized advertising just so you could find a place to take a piss you've probably hit rock bottom.

A few meters away a young man with a head of neatly styled short dark hair and permanent shadow of stubble across his strong jaw looked up from his omnitool and gave me a once over before heading my way. He wore the standard UNSC uniform, a blue and gray MCU, that accentuated his broad and muscular frame. He broke with the image of a stereotypical hardened marine with a large toothy grin and jovial greeting, "Private Shepard?"

Months of military discipline and conditioning kicked in as I unconsciously stood ramrod straight and stoically nodded. A quick glance at his collar revealed his rank with two bronze chevrons. A Corporal.

He reached out, offering his hand in greeting. I hesitantly reciprocated and felt his strong grip, squeezing my hand. I saw it as the challenge it was and not wanting to be found weak or wanting on this first impression, I squeezed back strongly, staring back defiantly into his blue eyes.

His eyebrows crinkled in amusement and appreciation as he withdrew his hand and gestured to a parked warthog nearby. "Corporal Toombs. Welcome to the black god's playground. Now grab your gear and let's get out of here. We're running behind schedule and the XO is going to flip out if we make him wait much longer."

Disappointed that I would not be able to take a leak just yet, I placed my dog tags back around my neck and frowned at his name for the naval depot. That only reinforced my original idea that this whole place was built atop the remains of some supernatural beast, but was forced to drop my thoughts to grab my bags and keep up.

I trailed behind him with difficulty, nearly bumping into people or objects as I apologized to no effect. By comparison, the Corporal weaved through the loading dock with an ease that made him part of the flow. My mind deviated along a tangent for a moment as I pondered if that was just a byproduct of becoming accustomed to Czarnobog that I would gain over time.

Then I contemplated what it said about me that I was resigned to simply becoming part of some slumbering dark god's madness.

Should have thought of that before I took the path that lead here. Kinda too late to begin worrying now, isn't it? Lowered expectations, Luis.

Pay attention.

The warning of the voice in the back of my mind brought on conflicting subliminal responses of confusion and the paranoid fear of a looming threat. My blood ran cold as I contemplated the scary possibility that my biotic implants were indeed causing me to hallucinate. Then in an instant an unnatural tingle ran down the back of neck which set the hairs there on end. Instinctively looking over my shoulder quickly I realized that my clumsy meandering had brought me into the path of an automated powerloader carrying a large cargo container. I jumped out of the way just before I got smashed into Shepard paste.

Amazingly, no one even noticed. Did accidents happened frequently and no one bats an eyelash? That's comforting.

I blew out a breath and shook my head, unwilling to entertain the notion that my bioamp was malfunctioning or that I had premonition warning me of danger. Corporal Toombs had stopped near an M12 Warthog parked at the far end of the docking bay. Reaching the vehicle I stood by unsure of what to do or where I was supposed to sit. Toombs jumped into into the driver's seat and took pity on me, gesturing to the passenger's seat. "Just throw your bags in the back and hop on in. Your transport was late. We got to get going before the XO blows an environmental seal."

That was the second time he'd mentioned my new Executive Officer being furious about my being late. As if I had any control over that.

As I complied Corporal Toombs ran his hands over the haptic controls and the engine of the warthog roared to life. He slowly exited us out of the docking bay, somehow miraculously avoiding hitting anything or anyone, and entered a smaller adjoining tunnel cut into the reddish brown rock of Czarnobog. The Corporal grinned as a way of warning, "Brace yourself, nublet."

I barely had time to process his ominous statement when the engine rose to a pitch that I'd never heard a vehicle make before. Then my ribs met my spine as the warthog accelerated down the dark tunnel at top speed.

As we exited the tunnel into Czarnobog Naval Depot itself my fear and doubt in the Corporal's sanity gave way to awe. Laid out before me was a small city of structures nestled inside a massive cavern system and shrouded in perpetual darkness. Vehicles flew by over head, their blinking safety lights helping to track their movement as they winded through overhangs of rock and tall buildings. Far above there were massive holes punched through rock covered by a networked lattice giving form to protective domes that sheltered the open air atmosphere of the naval depot. Peering through these colossal skylights showed glimpses of what looked like half of the Arcturus Fleet orbiting in the foreground of the looming figure of the gas giant, Andarta, bright bronze with streaks of aquamarine in it's upper atmosphere.

Not bothering with a scenic route for my benefit, the warthog continued along at it's breakneck pace as Toombs guided it through the sparse traffic down the narrow expressway around the outskirts of the naval depot. We left the cavern city behind as we sped through another tunnel with branching exits in the bedrock marked by holographic signs. A few moments later we exited to the perpetual night time landscape of another grouping of military structures tightly packed on an open plateau under a massive dome structure. To the left there was a breathtaking view overlooking the the rocky plains of Czarnobog and an even better view of Andarta.

"Welcome to Berehynia Station. Home of the Thirty Fifth Frontier, the Arcturus Stormbringers."

I nodded mutely, staggered by the surrounding landscape of what was to become my new home. Even if this place had a dreary and cold feel

to it there was a bit of a redeeming value. Maybe lowering my expectations was a bit premature?

Or maybe I'll worry about that after I've taken a leak and seen what else they throw at me here.

Shifting in my seat I was once again made aware of how revolting I felt. Add a shower and toothbrush to that list, too.

The warthog slowed as Toombs banked it to the right, following a small offramp and onto narrow streets separating large prefabrication construction buildings that showed their age. Overhead lamps and neon haptic displays added to Andarta's dull illumination as other people, our fellow Marines I could only assume, went about their business.

Seeing people in regular civilian clothing sent a small thrill of excitement through me at the potential of wearing something other than the UNSC issued uniforms that I'd become accustomed to over the past half a year. I rolled my eyes as I realized how deprived I had become that something as simple as wearing regular clothes now became a benchmark for happiness. Now how's that for lowered expectations?

Then I wondered if any of my old clothes still fit. I wasn't delusional enough to believe that I had gained enough muscle mass to completely change my appearance, but I would have to be equally insane to think that there had been no significant increase.

Great. So now I needed to add shopping for new clothes to the growing list of things to accomplish here in my first week on active duty.

One thing at a time. Piss first. Everything else later.

Toombs made a sudden tight turn to the left and down a sharp decline under one of the nondescript buildings that lead to a spacious and brightly lit parking garage. Several other vehicles and a handful of exoskeletons lined the outer perimeter, parked in an organized manner. And dead center in the room was a handful of marines dressed in their physical fitness uniforms, coated in sweat and all glaring our way. A large black emblem was etched into the floor beneath their feet that I couldn't quite make out.

Wait... was it a fish? Why the hell would they have a fish as a mascot?

Toombs parked and hopped out, a large grin on his face as he announced our arrival obnoxiously loud, "You mean I didn't miss PT?"

Several of those still present grumbled, their faces flushed as the sweat dripped from their brows. One woman, taut with thick muscle bulging under her dark skin, broke away from the group and casually ambled our way despite perspiration of heavy exertion clinging to her body. "You never miss PT when you're in the UNSC. Knock 'em out, Corporal."

Toombs' grin widened as he dropped to the ground. "Yes, First Sergeant Languani! I love PT, First Sergeant Languani!"

I hopped out of the warthog, unsure once again of what I was supposed to do. The woman, my First Sergeant I assumed, looked my way with a wicked grin of her own and folded her arms. "I suppose you're Private Shepard?"

The training kicked in yet again as I answered concisely, even if my heart was beating wildly with nervousness. After seeing her greeting for Corporal Toombs I didn't need to be an asari to know where this conversation was heading. My only worry was if my bladder would hold. "Yes, First Sergeant."

She tilted her head to the ground slightly as way of invitation. "Well, you missed PT this morning, too. Forty pushups should work. Think of this as a great way to get some of that jump lag out of your system."

Before she even had finished her sentence I was on the ground and had cranked out two pushups. The remaining marines who had not disappeared into a stairwell at the far end of the room gathered around to taunt us.

"I love it when they're fresh out of initial training. All broken in like obedient little puppies eager to please."

"Don't look now, but you're about to get blown out by the new guy, Zeke."

"Look at that fucker go!"

"What the hell are they feeding kids in UCMT and MVC nowadays?"

"I dunno, but it looks like they're scrapping the bottom of the barrel when it comes to the outer colonies."

"How do you figure he's from the outer colonies?"

"Dunno. He's got that isolated, inbred shithole look to him."

After several months of verbal abuse from masters like DI Bramante and DI Ellison it was a simple task to ignore their amateur commentary. In no time at all I had finished my forty and felt a surge of relief that I had managed not to piss myself. Only upon standing did I notice that I had beaten Corporal Toombs, who was barely getting to his feet despite the fact he'd started before I had.

"Got beat by a Private fresh off the transport. Shameful, Corporal. Just shameful. Head upstairs. Corporal Marzette and the XO should have the processing ready." The First Sergeant eyed us both with amusement before shaking her head at Toombs. She spared a glance my way and nodded, "Welcome to the pod, Private Shepard. Keep it up with that effort. That's the eezo standard I expect from you."

I nodded, unsure what exactly she was implying. Welcome to the pod? What the hell is that supposed to mean?

But before I could think to ask the group dispersed and I was forced to grab my bags to follow Toombs once more. We climbed a steep narrow staircase, because there wasn't any other kind in the UNSC, and

exited at the ground level of the building. A wide hallway lined with doors lead towards an open lobby and office area filled with workstations. Much like the facilities in UCMT and MVC, the walls were decorated with plaques, awards, and memorabilia of the unit's history.

A lone clerk in her MCUs looked bored and nearly asleep at her desk until she noticed our arrival. Her eyes narrowed and she checked her chronometer before harshly greeting us, "Took you long enough, Zeke. What did you do? Take him on one of your tours?"

Toombs rolled his eyes and drawled in an unamused tone, "Funny, Gemma. I was stuck waiting for his shuttle to show up. You want to blame someone, take it up with the navy or air force. Their pilots can't fucking tell time or stick to a schedule."

Not the least bit interested in the topic of their discussion after having lived through it I looked around for obvious signs of a restroom but all I found were more examples of the large emblem from earlier.

Distracted by the shape I tried to discern it's identity. Maybe not a fish after all. A dolphin? Or a whale?

Only partially satisfied with his response, the clerk, who wore the rank of Corporal upon her collar, looked my way with a frown and curtly began issuing orders, "Listen up, new guy. Drop your bags out here by one of the desks. The XO is all about business. Never bring anything into his office that isn't required."

I tore my eyes away from the emblem and frowned at her addressing me as 'new guy'. Not wanting to do something that might incur the wrath of anyone, I kept my mouth shut and quickly followed the clerk's advice.

Resuming her brusque manner she began typing into her terminal, rattling off further instructions. "Activate your omnitool and open it up to external control. I have to configure your settings so I can create a secure log in to the unit and greater Czarnobog networks. After you're done here Corporal Toombs will escort you to your barracks so you can drop off your personal effects. You are then to report to the quartermaster and armory on sub level one for issuing of equipment and registering of weapons. Store your equipment in your assigned storage locker and then check back in with me so we can finalize your inprocessing." Seeing my stunned expression she raised an eyebrow and spoke slowly to enunciate every word as if I had difficulty understanding simple concepts. "Do you understand everything I just said, Private?"

Well at least she had made the change from new guy to Private. Lowered expectations.

I nodded stiffly at her obnoxious behavior but was saved having to reply by Toombs who remarked on my behalf. "He understood you perfectly, Gemma. And if he didn't I'll make sure he knows where to go and what he needs to get done."

Marzette glanced at Toombs with disbelief in his ability to be of any assistance to anyone, but opted not to remark. Instead she rolled her eyes and resumed typing away at her terminal. She didn't even bother

in giving any closure or dismissal to the conversation. Not that she had given any greeting either. So I guess that was staying consistent, right?

Toombs gestured silently for me to follow him. Taking one more glance at Corporal Marzette I followed him in to a door labeled with the holographic placard of Lieutenant First Grade Hattori.

Before he tapped the haptic lock I interrupted him, having reached my limit. "Is there a latrine around here that I could use, Corporal?"

He paused and eyed me with a mystified glance before gesturing towards a door down the at the other end of the hallway, "Make it quick."

I nodded gratefully and ignored the bewildered expressions of both Corporals as I dashed towards my salvation. Once inside and at the safety of a urinal I relieved myself with a loud groaning sigh that I'm pretty sure would have sounded obscene if anyone else had heard it.

While washing my hands I took in my appearance in the mirror above the row of sinks. The trip here from Amaterasu had taken it's toll on me. Looking at my bloodshot eyes set into dark circles, stubble across the jaw, and an oily complexion to my skin gave me pause. Was this the first impression I was leaving with everyone so far? Adding on another twenty kilos of muscle and an alcohol stench ingrained into every fiber of my being would make me the near spitting image of my father when he would get drunk.

Well that's a fucking comforting little digression into things I didn't need to think about right now.

With a sigh I splashed some water on my face and tried to clean up somewhat before rejoining Toombs outside of the XO's office.

Toombs took in my damp face with a frown but shrugged it off and tapped the haptic lock, "Corporal Toombs with Private Shepard reporting in as requested, Lieutenant Hattori."

"Enter."

The locking mechanism released and the door slid open to reveal a very lived in office space. It was an interesting change from keeping with the theme so far that I had seen here in Czarnobog. Certainly a stark contrast to the offices of the Drill Instructors and other staff from my training units. Even First Sergeant Yilmaz's office had lacked the same polished feel to it. This had more in common with the ornate private offices Abuela and Abuelo kept in their home on Bekenstein.

Diplomas from prestigious schools, plaques for community service, holos with important looking people, and military awards filled every available surface. My new Executive Officer was clearly a well educated and successful man.

And a very young one at that. He didn't look to be much older than myself, with a handsome clean shaven face and black hair shortly cropped with a stylish flair. Even in MCUs he had an aura of

professionalism and refinement.

And he had yet to say anything to us, opting instead to stay seated behind his desk with a stern gaze while silently sizing me up.

I tried not to feel intimidated or nervous as I stood there saluting, using every fiber of my determination to prop up my flagging confidence in the uncomfortable silence. It was mostly a wasted effort as a depressingly familiar feeling of insecurity crept into my mind. I was reminded of my many successful relatives and how they had this same quality of effortlessly exuding sophistication and confidence in everything they did. I suppressed a groan as a new stray thought entered my mind and I was forced to contemplate the possibility that my new executive officer might be the male military version of Lizzy.

And with that comparison firmly in the forefront of my mind I began to really feel self conscious about my haggard appearance.

Great job on the first impressions today, Luis._ 'Hi! I'm Private Shepard. Normally I shower regularly, but you've just caught me at a bad time. I swear I don't always look and smell like this.'_

Apparently low expectations will be expanded to myself as well.

"At ease." The Lieutenant broke from his assessment and waved away our salutes. He stood and extended his hand my direction with a thin smile that looked forced compared to his reserved nature before. "Welcome to the pod."

I hesitantly shook his hand and gave him a slightly perplexed look at the greeting. Maybe that was the unit motto?

He paid my confusion no mind and returned to his seat as he began covering the basics of my assignment to the company. "You're to be assigned to third platoon, fifth squad, bravo team."

To my side Corporal Toombs winked and nodded my direction. I didn't know what any of this meant, but I could only assume that was the same place Toombs was assigned.

At least that's what I hope that meant. Actually, it's safer to assume I have no clue what's going on here.

"Your MVC test scores are excellent, but we'll have you back on the range and in sims by the end of the week to verify your proficiency with standard issue weapons systems in squad level tactics. We're a standard patrol and response light infantry unit so there isn't anything new you'll have to be trained on outside of some of the vehicle mounted weapon systems we have." I listened intently to what he was saying, but the lack of sleep and food were playing havoc on my ability to focus. The Lieutenant carried on until he came upon something in my files that gave him pause. "I don't see anything in your records about a recognized colonial license for operating a civilian vehicle. Can you drive, Private Shepard?"

My eyes jumped between the Lieutenant and Corporal as I hemmed and hawed under their increasingly incredulous attention. Was it necessary that I be licensed? They never told me this when I was

recruited or during training. "I, uh, no, sir." I swallowed and attempted to reign in my nerves. "I... I failed the exams. On Mindoir and Bekenstein, sir."

Corporal Toombs snorted loudly and shook with mirth, having to look away from us both when the Lieutenant eyed him with a disapproving glare. Shifting his annoyed gaze to me the Lieutenant waved away my chagrined response and continued. "No bother. It's standard practice to assign new recruits to the basic tactical vehicle operation course provided by Czarnobog admin and training. You'll get your certification there."

I nodded and resisted the urge to throw Corporal Toombs a nasty glare out of the corner of my eyes. Thankfully I didn't need to reign in that impulse for very long because the door to the Lieutenant's office opened to admit a man clad in a sweat stained physical training uniform. A woman in full officer's dress followed behind him.

"Attention!" The Lieutenant's abrupt command and rising to his feet clued me in that one of these people was higher ranking than him. I glanced at the rank on the woman's collar and epaulets, Lieutenant Second Grade, and concluded her companion to be the senior officer in the room.

"As you were." He replied smoothly with a deep voice and moved to place himself in front of me. The man was slim and muscular with a light golden hue to his complexion. His every action carried a great deal of easy confidence, down to to his relaxed posture, welcoming smile, and the hand he was extending to me, "Private Shepard, right? Captain Ian Shermarke, commander of Charlie Company."

Already accepting the handshake out of instinct I paused, taken aback by the revelation of his rank and role. So I was shaking hands with my new Company Commander? Well, no time like the present to make a good impression, right? I increased the strength in my grip and stood tall, trying to put my best foot forward.

Yeah. Sure. Go with that winning strategy, Luis.

The Captain's smile widened at my attempts and squeezed back, crushing my hand with ease in his iron grip.

At some level I was really impressed with my ability to hold back from wincing, but internally I was somewhere between face palming at my latest blunder and biting my lip to ignore the pain.

Satisfied that he had established his dominance, Captain Shermarke relinquished my hand, which I tried to flex discreetly. "Welcome to the pod, Private."

Okay. That was the third time I've heard that perplexing greeting, but thankfully this time someone took pity on my confusion as the woman stepped forward to introduce herself.

"It's a running joke we have turned into the motto for the unit. Our mascot is an orca so we refer to ourselves as the pod." The woman didn't bother with a handshake, opting instead for a stiff nod and bright smile. She was taller than Captain Shermarke, with pale skin, brown eyes, and dark hair pulled back into a bun. "Lieutenant Zlata

Nesterovic, third platoon leader."

And now the emblem made sense.

Actually, does it really? Who the hell makes a giant dolphin the mascot of an infantry unit?

My musings were cut short as I noticed that while she was very cordial in her greeting her eyes held a bit of restrained glee. In my limited military experience that can never be a good sign. "I've never had the opportunity to work with a biotic before. There was the standard familiarization course in OCS and MVC, of course, but that was a short introduction with emphasis on theory. This is going to be a first for both of us. Since I knew you'd be assigned to my platoon I have been reviewing additional materials and had your squad run extra sims. A biotic asset is invaluable in tactical operations and we need to know how to best utilize you. I'm really looking forward to working together so we can maximize both of our potentials."

My fears grew as she blabbered on. Further proof verifying my theory that it's never a good sign when an officer is excited about something. But on the positive side of the ledger, at least she didn't think biotics were some sort of freaks or pariahs. Lowered expectations.

Then again she thinks I'm her test subject for learning how to command biotics in the field.

Sorry, a 'biotic asset'. Like I'm some piece of equipment she requisitioned and command approved her request. Now she can't wait to play with it.

Yeah. This might end up being a wee bit problematic.

"We just about done here, Lieutenant Hattori? I'm sure Private Shepard could use a chance to eat and freshen up once we get him situated." The commander folded his arms and smiled sympathetically my way, putting me at ease as he accurately understood and commiserated with my plight. "It's come to my understanding you took a Navy Spacelift Condor from Amaterasu. You have my sympathies."

Well, at least someone here was sane and had their priorities straight. Food and a shower sounded great. If I could work in a nap too that would be even better.

The XO returned to his terminal, "Finalizing that now, sir. Corporal Marzette has the haptic work done and logged Private Shepard onto the servers here and at battalion pending their verification. I've already authorized enrollment in the introductory courses beginning next week. I'll have Corporal Marzette forward that to Lieutenant Nesterovic's calendar. Just have to upload his authorization codes and set an appointment with Sergeant Cermak for issuing gear later this morning."

Captain Shermarke nodded and glanced at Lieutenant Nesterovic, "While he's doing that can you synchronize him with your platoon VI?"

She nodded and set about the task by activating her omnitool. A moment later my omnitool pinged once more, the internal VI alerting

me to an upload initiated by the unit's local servers. Glancing at the officers in the room I was given a silent reassurance to accept the transfer. When it was done a synthetic male voice greeted me, _"Welcome to Charlie Company Third Platoon, Private Second Grade Luis Vincent Shepard."_

Normally I wasn't one for making small talk with a VI but the way everyone else was waiting on my response gave me the impression it was expected.

Fine. Whatever moves this process along. All I want is that food and shower.

Feeling like a fool I waved awkwardly at my left wrist and replied hesitantly, "Uh, hi, VI. Nice to... meet you?"

"_You may refer to me as Alfons, your platoon Real Time Tactical Assistance Virtual Intelligence. I can assist you with anything you need in order to help you fulfill your duties."_

If this thing can direct me to the nearest mess hall I'd gladly eat one of those pineapple and spinach energy bars right about now with zero complaints.

That stray thought physically manifested itself as a long gurgle and the even louder grumble from my stomach. I gazed around the room in panicked mortification as everyone else looked on with varying degrees of disgust or amusement.

Well except for Lieutenant Hattori. He just maintained that flinty frown, which was probably warranted at this point.

The CO dismissed us with a laugh and gesture to the door. "Corporal Toombs. See to it that Private Shepard is shown his bunk in dormitory three and where the personal facilities are located. Then the two of you head to get something to eat. That'll give Sergeant Cermak time to handle his own business before issuing gear and weapons."

Before we could leave Lieutenant Nesterovic called out to Toombs, her demeanor changing to become more assertive and even a bit sour, "Corporal. Let your squad leader know I'll be waiting in my office for her and Private Mullur when they're ready."

The Corporal nodded and we saluted before being dismissed. Once back in the relative safety of the office and lobby we relaxed a bit. I glanced at Toombs and gestured over my shoulder with my thumb towards the XO's office. "Are they always so...?"

"Yeah. We've got a damn good group of officers, but sometimes they're a bit much to deal with." Toombs sighed and started walking back down the hall we had passed through earlier. I gave Corporal Marzette a glance, but she was still ignoring everything in favor of her terminal. Frowning once more at the odd behavior of everyone in this place I turned on my heel and caught up with Toombs as he entered the stairwell to ascend once more. Much to the delight of my legs, which were still a bit stiff from having been seated for the majority of the last few days.

Thankfully we only ascended one floor and exited into a much larger hallway than the one downstairs. Unfortunately this one seemed to

filled to capacity with what seemed like the entire unit. Dozens of people streamed past and greeted us as they hurried about with their morning hygiene. The smell of soap mixed with steam lingered in the air and the sound of running water came from a large nearby room, cluing me in to the fact that this must be where the showers were located.

The thought of immersing my body in soothing hot water caused me to close my eyes.

That was when I walked face first into someone.

"Watch where the fuck you're going, new guy."

I recoiled and attempted to apologize but was taken aback by the venom in this person's voice. And again with the 'new guy'? Seriously? Isn't there a reason we put name tags on our uniforms?

He was still clad in his own physical training uniform, about my height with a thin muscular build, copper colored skin, a few tattoos, short black hair, and green eyes. And judging by the murderous scowl on his face he was doing his best to convey a burning desire to kick my ass.

Great. Just what I needed. Another Finch. And with my luck he's going to outrank me.

Upon thinking that through it's a safe bet to assume everyone here outranks me. I did just graduate after all.

To diffuse the situation I tried a nervous and friendly smile. No such luck. His glare only intensified in response and caused my smile to falter.

"Relax, man. It's not that serious." Toombs' light reprimand seemed to carry enough weight to make this person temper his ire towards me. To complete the impromptu introduction Toombs gestured between the two of us. "Shepard, O'Connell. O'Connell, Shepard. He's in fifth with us."

Fifth? With us? As in this guy is in our squad?

And like that, things go from bad to worse. Lowered expectations my ass.

O'Connell grunted in response and gave me another irritated side glance before moving on to continue with his morning routine.

"So as you can see that's the showers and latrines. Best to get in there right away after PT or kill some time doing something else until the crowd thins out." Toombs rattled off the layout of the floor in lackluster manner, complete with vague directions and advice. Corporal Marzette's comment earlier about him giving tours were starting to make sense because I was kind of getting the idea that being a competent tour guide was not one of his strengths. "Across the hall are the personal storage lockers and laundry facilities. Down the hall that way is the rec room and kitchen. Don't bother trying to cook anything in there unless you're making enough to feed half of the company."

A bit of despair crept in as I gained a new appreciation for the organized nature to the chaos of my new home. I figured my chances of getting a shower or food anytime soon were diminishing by the second.

"_Your assigned locker is three dash five dash two dash two, Private Shepard. Awaiting your input of a private security code to finalize registration." _The platoon VI, Alfons, interrupted my melancholy to inform me of that pressing obligation. Sighing in frustration, I pressed myself against the wall to allow others to pass as I quickly entered in one of the many passwords I used. _"Registration finalized. Logging you out, Private Shepard." _

Seeing that I was done Toombs waved for me to follow him as he pressed on through the throngs of my fellow marines and towards one of the large doors that never seemed to close as people passed through. "And this is dorm three. Welcome home."

Dubiously glancing between Toombs and the large room that lay beyond the open doorway I was unimpressed with my new 'home'. It was an unwelcoming and hideous monstrosity made out of prefabricated metal and permacrete. More of that charming black god's paradise motif that was ubiquitous across the depot.

A quick glance at the difficult to miss stenciled marking in the hallway verified that this was indeed dormitory three as well as the home of third platoon, the Blackfish. Whatever that means. Probably more stupid names about giant dolphins.

I got a better view once we stepped inside, and immediately regretted it. It was a freezing cold, spacious open hall with a low ceiling and plenty of evenly spaced doorways arranged around the perimeter. A few metal tables and benches filled the hall itself but the majority of the room was open space. I was just about to gripe about the temperature when people enter or exit the doorways clued me in to something that finally made my heart soar today.

Private bunk spaces.

Or at least more private, as it looked like a handful of marines shared a room.

Not that I was complaining. Even if this place feels like a storage freezer it still beats having to sleep in one open bay with several people who somehow managed to synchronize their snoring.

"Corporal Toombs!" A loud voice boomed out across the hall that was impossible to miss.

My companion froze and cringed, mumbling under his breath with resigned despair, "Here we go again." He quickly adopted a stoic expression and replied with loud, and fake, enthusiasm, "Yes, Chief Sergeant Sokol?"

The owner of the voice, a gruff looking man with dark features dressed in MCUs who appeared to be all muscle and attitude, made his way towards us. Well, more like stomped his way.

There was something in his demeanor and way of walking that reminded me of the various drill instructors I had encountered, eliciting that

well honed fear of authority response in me.

As he neared he eyed me for a moment before refocusing on Toombs with a disapproving glare and folded arms, "Did you reconsider your position after our discussion last night, Corporal?"

The vague nature of his question piqued my interest, which was always primed to ignore important things in favor of paying way more attention to other people and their business than was healthy. Or as my mother used to say, being a nosy bastard. Well, actually she had never uttered the bastard part, but it was implied with her glare whenever she would lecture me.

Toombs' face soured as he glared at the Chief Sergeant, shaking his head slightly, "No, Sergeant. I've made up my mind."

Chief Sergeant Sokol grunted discontentedly and eyed the Corporal for a moment before turning his attention to me. "You're Private Shepard, correct?"

Seeing the man's stern way of handling Toombs made me a bit anxious, but also curious what they could be discussing. Guessing by his rank, I would assume that this was my new Platoon Sergeant.

Okay, let's try not to fuck this first impression up.

"No, Chief Sergeant."

Toombs turned his head to look at me queerly. Sergeant Sokol's expression lost it's hardness as his eyebrows rose slightly. Confused, and starting to panic, I tried recall what I had just said...

Oh for fuck's sake!

Relax. Take a deep breath. This is going to be one of those things that later on I can laugh at. Like, much later on. Decades from now. Lowered expectations.

"I mean yes!" I blurted out quickly and a bit too loudly, drawing the attention of most everyone in the dorm. Toombs doubled over in laughter as Sergeant Sokol's face split into a wide grin at my actions.

He reached across and clapped me once roughly on the shoulder, "Relax, Private. I'm Chief Sergeant Temuri Sokol, your Platoon Sergeant. Welcome to the pod."

Despondent over my mistake, I took solace in the fact that at least I got that right. And would you look at that? Another reference to being a giant dolphin now. At this rate I wouldn't be shocked if someone is going to start clapping their hands and making dolphin noises as way of greeting. In fact I was just about willing to place a wager of five credits that would happen before the end of the day.

Chief Sergeant Sokol looked over his shoulder and his booming voice was heard once more, "Adame! Svensson! Why am I doing your job, Sergeants? Drop your beauty routines and come say hello to your new rifleman like you should have done!"

Two women came jogging forward from different parts of the dorm. The first was tall and tan with her dark brown hair pulled back into a tight ponytail. She was in her dress uniform, rows of medals and awards pinned to her chest. The other was noticeably shorter with fair skin and dark blonde hair braided into rows along her scalp. She wore her standard MCU. They both gave me a quick glance before staring daggers at Toombs.

"Private Shepard, this is your squad leader, Staff Sergeant Tazmin Adame." Sergeant Sokol pointed to the taller of the pair. Still wearing her look of annoyance, she looked my way and curtly nodded.

"And your team leader, Sergeant Franciska Svensson." At least she gave warm smile and wave, but still dropped it in favor of a dour expression once she glanced back at Toombs.

Oblivious to the byplay, or just expertly ignoring it, Sergeant Sokol glanced at the two women with his stern expression and reminded them once more with an ominous warning before leaving, "I don't want to have to tell you again to keep your house in order, fifth."

They waited a moment for Sergeant Sokol to leave earshot before turning on Toombs with ire. Sergeant Adame, looking incredulous with her hands on her hips, railed at him, "One thing. You had one simple task, Corporal."

Nodding along with her superior, Sergeant Svensson folded her arms and added, "Yeah, what the fuck, Zeke? We asked you to give us a heads up when you were leaving Berehynia. You know Sokol has it out for us."

Recognizing his mistake, Toombs winced once more and begged forgiveness, "Shit. I'm sorry. The transport was late so I rushed to get back before the XO started raising hell. We've been rushing through his inprocessing and it slipped my mind to send the message."

Sergeant Adame threw her hands up in the air and turned away in disgust, only to remember she had yet to actually talk to me. She turned back around and speared me with a furious glare, "New guy, my plate is full today so I need you to do one thing for me. Do everything you are told and do not get in trouble. Can you do that?"

Not the least bit amused at being called the new guy again, I at least recognized that I had walked into a situation where this Sergeant Adame was upset at something and it was in my best interest not to provoke her. I nodded fearfully and she breathed a sigh of relief. She gestured to Svensson, "He's all yours. I have to go and grab Mullur so we can head out. Make sure the squad gets their maintenance done for the day. Let me know by lunch if we're going to have any problems."

We watched her trudge off in an uneasy silence. Sergeant Svensson broke it with a sigh and looked at Toombs with less heat, "We can't keep having these problems, Zeke."

Toombs sagged and nodded, disappointed to have let her down. "Yeah.

My bad. I was just so focused on making sure we didn't have the XO on our backs that it slipped my mind."

She nodded sympathetically and smiled, "Shit happens, but we can't afford to have any more screw ups. We're barely holding on as it is." Her expression hardened as she challenged him, "I need you and Deanne on your game today."

He nodded once more and stood tall. "Got it, Sergeant."

Turning her attention to me she smiled genuinely and extended her hand, "Welcome to the team, Private Shepard. Heard nothing but good things. Should be interesting having a biotic around."

Not wanting to add to my success rate for today I stuck with a simple handshake that, thankfully, avoided becoming a debacle.

"Let's get you to your bunk so you can drop off your bags and meet your teammates." She gestured towards a door off to the right hand side near the far end of the hall.

We trailed behind and reached room three two two where she tapped the holographic lock display. Sergeant Svensson cleared her throat and adopted an annoyed tone, "Asma. Nik. You have about five seconds to be decent or we're going to have problems."

Okay. That was certainly an odd way of announcing yourself.

Given the way my day was going I dreaded knowing what was going on the other side of that door. Turning to Toombs in order to get some explanation about what was going on, or at least a warning, I was left frowning and puzzled as his gaze was pensively focused on the metal plates beneath his feet.

Before I could try to figure out what was going on the door opened and my companions stepped through. I followed them into a cramped room that was barely larger than the pantry at my grandparent's place back on Bekenstein.

The first thing that hit me was the welcome feeling of warmth. Much to my joy it would seem that these living quarters were heated. Once again amazed at my happiness over simple luxuries I drew in a big, relieved sigh only to pause.

What in the hell was that smell?

It wasn't too overwhelming, but there was a distinct odor to the room. Musty, like stale sweat and body odor mixed with pungent food. I recoiled and discreetly covered my nose with the back of my right hand, glancing around wildly for the source of the stench.

What I found wasn't reassuring. The room shared the same cold and worn aesthetic as everything else here. Permacrete and metal. To either side of the room were a pair of bunk beds built into cubbies in the wall with accompanying wall lockers. At the far end of the room was a pair of metal chairs next to a simple desk with a terminal station.

Taking another look at the layout of the room and I was suddenly struck by how much this place resembled a mausoleum. Which was

depressing, and started to explain the smell.

So... I guess this is home?

The two occupants in the room, who were thankfully dressed in the MCUs, stood by watching me curiously. One of them, a pale guy with blue eyes and short brown hair, questioned aloud, "This the new guy?"

"Yep. This is the new guy." Sergeant Svensson leaned against one of the wall lockers and rapped her knuckles against the metal frame of the upper bunk near her head. "This one is yours, Shepard."

I hesitated for a moment, waiting for an introduction. Or at least an explanation for the smell. Hell, I'd settle for not having everyone call me the new guy at this point.

Sensing I wasn't going to be getting any of my wishes answered I moved to place my bags on the bunk, and was further unnerved as they all watched me in silence. I turned around and felt the tension rise as no one said a word. Just continued to stare like I was supposed to do something. Figuring they were waiting on me to take the first step, I addressed them. Maybe they would bother remembering my name. "Hey. I'm Luis Shepard."

Aaaaaaaaand nothing. The response of the other occupants was to continue their silent staring like I was some strange interloper in their personal space. Which I suppose I was. The new guy interloper in their dark, smelly little cave.

After another awkward moment of silence I quirked my lips to the side and balled by fists to restrain them from fidgeting. Once more I internally bemoaned the way this disastrous day was turning out. All I wanted was a shower, something to eat, and a nap.

Making the best of the moment, I sized up my fellow bunkmates. Aside from the guy who had spoken, the other occupant was a tall woman with richly bronzed skin and black hair in a french plait. Her face was locked into a sour expression as she scrutinized me. Noticing my own gaze upon her she ignored my attempt to be friendly, opting instead to glare at me accusingly. "New guy. You don't snore or anything, do you?"

Wow. I was taken aback by her hostility and blunt question, being reminded of my interactions earlier with Corporal Marzette and O'Connell but answered anyways, "Uh, no."

Seemingly not satisfied by my answer she pressed on, "Nothing? No weird habits?"

I looked to Svensson and Toombs for some help but they seemed just as interested in my answer, which I delivered feebly. "Not that I know of?"

Toombs raised an eyebrow at my meek reply and continued the questioning, "Like has anyone ever told you that you do odd shit? Things that make you generally unbearable to be around?"

Fumbling for a way to end the line of questioning I answered honestly, "I sometimes drool when I sleep?"

The room went quiet as they processed my pathetic admission with disgusted grimaces. Finally it was Toombs who remarked to the rest of the room with an indifferent shrug. "Well, if that's the worst we've got to worry about then it can't be that bad. Can't be any worse than Wickersham."

At my confused glance Sergeant Svensson filled in the gaps, "Corporal Wickersham is who you're replacing. She had the habit of trying to liven up places with these scented mixtures she would buy on Sirona." The Sergeant eyed the other occupants of the room disdainfully and sneered, "Take a deep breath and then guess why."

Yeah, I wasn't going to be doing that voluntarily, but I could understand this Corporal Wickersham's motivation.

The younger woman seemed to finally be mollified by the reasoning of her peers and lost her scowl, extending her hand with a half grin as an apology, "Private Asma El Mofty. Sorry about that, but I just wanted to be sure. Having one freak in our room is bad enough."

But before I could accept the gesture or respond the guy with brown hair erupted in indignation, "Call me a freak again and I'm going to kick your ass, Asma!"

Thoroughly unfazed by his threat, Asma rolled her eyes and dismissed his vitriol calmly, "That means you'd have to do something other than jerk off to your sims."

Toombs let loose a low whistle and chuckled appreciatively, "You walked right into that one, Nik."

Having seen, and heard, enough, Sergeant Svensson interrupted their bickering, "Knock it off, both of you. It's too damn early to start with this shit." She eyed the brown haired guy with critical gaze before reprimanding him, "And I better not find out that you're doing that again, Nik."

Giving this guy, Nik I guess was his name, a bewildered glance I began to worry about my assignment to this unit. First there was the super hostile reactions I was getting from just about everyone. Then there was the smell in this room. And now I was afraid to ask what they meant about his proclivities with erotic sims. I'd been traumatized enough over the past day and a half, thank you very much.

A confirmation chime and voice interrupted the enlightening introduction. "Is it safe to come in? I don't want to be blinded by someone's pale ass."

Sergeant Svensson shook her head and admitted in two additional women in MCUs. The taller and more burly of the pair addressed everyone with a cheerful and bawdy greeting as she stepped through the doorway, "Good morning, bitches!" She followed up her colorful entrance by breathing deeply and beamed brightly, "Still smells like you guys keep a varren in here."

Sergeant Svensson rolled her eyes at the newcomer's theatrics and drawled, "Where's O'Connell?"

The burly brunette gestured over her shoulder with her thumb, "Finishing getting dressed. Said he got held up in the hallway." She noticed my presence and her smile widened even more, "Is this the new guy?"

I frowned in annoyance, a combination of recalling O'Connell as the surly bastard from the hallway and starting to become annoyed with this label of 'new guy'.

Sergeant Svensson nodded and did the introductions, "It is. Private Shepard, these are some more of our squad members from alpha team. Corporal Deanne Cerny," The tall brunette gave me a saucy wink and wave, "And Private Hualing Teoh." Her companion, a fit and muscular asian woman with straight black hair pulled into a neat ponytail smiled and nodded.

"Not bad. About time we get some more eye candy around here." Corporal Cerny eyed me appreciatively and then suppressed some chuckles as my frown melted into a stunned expression.

Uh, what?

Teoh grinned and folded her arms as she assessed me. "How about we trade you guys for him? You get Mullur and we get the new guy?"

The name Mullur sounded familiar, and I assumed I had heard it in passing today, but I was more concerned with the manner in which they were discussing me.

El Mofty mirrored Teoh's posture but retained her scowl, going into bargaining mode. "Take Suvorov too and we get O'Connell. Deal?"

Corporal Cerny's bright smile waned into a disgusted pucker as she glanced Nik's way. A moment later she shook her head and sighed, "No deal. Guess you get to keep the new guy."

Obviously unamused by their antics at his expense, Nik glowered and mumbled under his breath. I more than shared his annoyance. Between the lack of decent sleep, being hungry, and feeling filthy my patience for being called the 'new guy' was wearing thin.

Toombs on the other hand seemed to draw inspiration and glee from the situation, as he sought to cheer up Suvorov with a rough slap on the back, "Don't even sweat it, man. Like I'd ever let them trade you away. They can't handle Nikifor Suvorov. Besides, who else am I going to get quality porn from?"

Private Suvorov's expression lightened only slightly, enough to crack a thin smile.

"He's also a galaxy class perv. If you want to be spared mental scarring that the best neural therapies can't fix then do yourself a favor, Shepard." Asma folded her arms and lean back against the desk, giving me a bit of helpful advice while giving Suvorov an accusatory glance. "Never walk in unannounced. Always make sure Nik here isn't immersed in one of his sims. You'll thank me later."

Cerny nodded slowly and looked pained as if she was vividly recalling her own experience on this topic. "No kidding. Once you see that

there's no going back. Almost made me swear off guys."

"Almost?" Toombs prodded his fellow Corporal with a wide grin.

She shrugged back unapologetically in reply, "Yeah, but then I went and hung out with those navy guys in Spacelift and NavServ. Crisis resolved."

"Since we're on the topic of sims, are we going to have to run through more of them this week?" Teoh changed the subject smoothly with an eye roll over her team mate's antics. To which I was thankful for.

"Yeah. That was boring as fucking hell. If I have to practice cover fire for a biotic one more time I'm going to shoot the fucker myself." Suvorov chimed in with his own irritation over their training last week. Which only served to remind me of Lieutenant Nesterovic's comments about putting the squad through their paces to test out her knowledge on fielding a 'biotic asset'.

El Mofty let loose a short hollow laugh, "Never thought I'd see the day when Nik finds sims boring as fucking hell." She eyed him with mock appreciation. "There might just be hope for you yet, perv."

"And there might not be any hope left for you if you keep taunting him, Private. Because I'm feeling generous this morning that's your second warning." Sergeant Svensson addressed Asma with cold rebuke that got her point across quickly. Having reestablished order she glanced at Teoh and shrugged while jabbing her thumb in my direction, "Probably. Besides our whole reason for doing the training was last week was because he's a biotic. We've got to get used to having one in the squad."

And just like that, the silent hostile treatment had returned. Complete with scowls and displeased looks my way.

"So, can you like do tricks or something?" Suvorov broke the silence with an absurd question that bordered on some sort of request and caused me to do a double take.

The rest of the squad perked up and looked on curiously. As if I was going to break into a biotic performance to satisfy them.

Of course they were only playing. They couldn't be serious.

â€¦. could they?

As the seconds ticked by their expectant expressions brought on an increasing sense of dread. It would appear that more than the Platoon Leader thought of me as biotic field equipment.

Nervous as the response I would get as I denied their request, my hand crept up to my collar as I rubbed the back of my neck and fingered the cybernetic ports there as I babbled my excuses. "It's not really something I do for fun. Kinda draining. I haven't eaten or slept. I could hurt someone."

"That's fine. Just levitate something small." Cerny urged before unceremoniously shoving Teoh forward. "Use her. She's the lightest

one here. Hardly even has an ass on her."

Teoh squawked with surprise and indignation, glancing fearfully between Cerny and myself as she sought to put distance between us, "What? No. Don't. Not me. Pick Nik. He's the one who asked in the first place. Plus no one will care if he gets hurt if something goes wrong."

El Mofty nodded her head in agreement with Teoh while Suvorov looked suddenly fearful as his request returned with consequences. Glaring his way I half contemplated just letting my aura flare to scare him and the rest, but I wasn't sure if that would be taken the wrong way. Last thing I needed today was being hauled in by Naval Security for violating military codes or regulations on using my biotics.

Sergeant Svensson rolled her eyes and spoke out, "No one is levitating anyone. Right, Private Shepard? Because that would be violating your promise to Staff Sergeant Adame about staying out of trouble."

Thankful for her pointing out the obvious I nodded but before I could voice my agreement the the platoon VI interrupted, "_The unauthorized use of biotics within UNSC facilities or against UNSC personnel is strictly prohibited by UNSC CMJ article 214. I am obligated by my programming to notify command and installation authorities of any such acts I detect."_

Undeterred by the statement, Toombs rubbed his chin in thought as he dreamed up a scenario to test the VI, "What if Private Shepard were to use his biotics to prevent a falling object from hitting another marine in the barracks?"

"_Such an example would fall under UNSC CMJ Article 214, clause 6, Corporal Ezekiel Toombs. Emergency authorization for use of biotics to protect UNSC facilities, property, and personnel."_

Corporal Cerny folded her arms and frowned, displeased with that answer. "Huh. Facilities, property, and personnel. That's not alphabetical so I'm going to guess that those things are listed according to descending value to the UNSC. Figures."

The rest of squad, including myself, chuckled at her keen yet dark observations.

El Mofty carried on with the attempts to find loopholes in the logic of the VI and UNSC law, "So how is he supposed to train or practice if he has to go and get permission all the time?"

Ah, I could have answered this one having become familiar with the procedures during UCMT and MVC. First Sergeant Yilmaz had drilled this into my head my first week on Reach. But I was curious to see if the VI could impart some pertinent details about how my training would be allowed to continue here on Czarnobog.

"_UNSCMJ 214, Clause 2 states that training facilities and equipment are to be made available to biotic personnel upon request, Private First Grade Asma El Mofty. Lieutenant Second Grade Zlata Nesterovic has secured a Mark 49 training drone with VI software optimized for novice biotic training from battalion operations and arranged for a

training waiver on Private Second Class Luis Shepard's behalf." _

Well, that was informative, even if the mention of my needing novice training was a bit embarrassing.

"Huh. So if we call it training we can still get him to levitate someone? That would work, right?" Corporal Cerny pondered aloud, clearly proud of herself that she found what she believed to be a loophole that fulfilled her wish.

Sergeant Svensson, who up until now had been massaging her temples with eyes closed, as if to stave off a headache, suddenly clapped her hands and broke up the conversation. "Great talk everyone. We should do more team building exercises like this but right now we have maintenance to do this morning after chow. We stay on task, work together, and get the job done with minimal fuss. Emphasis on the minimal." She eyed myself and Toombs, "What's next for you two?"

Corporal Toombs casually rattled off our plan to get me through processing. "We're going to hang out a bit until the crowds thin out. Captain said he should get a shower in before getting something to eat. After that I'm taking him to get his gear and weapons assigned. Once he puts it away in his locker Marzette wants him back downstairs to finalize inprocessing. Figure we could have it all done before lunch."

Finally. A shower and some food. I could have jumped for joy if I wasn't so tired.

"_Private Shepard, your network logins have been authenticated with battalion administration and the Arcturus CENTCOM Regional Network Authority. Your private communications can now be synced." _

Alfons' unexpected interruption preceded my omnitool lighting up and pinging like crazy as messages, status alerts, and missed calls from my time aboard the Condor were received. I took a quick glance and saw that I had several messages from my family and friends, and more than a few from Klara.

"Wow. Someone's popular." Private Teoh dryly remarked as she and the rest of the squad reacted to the display.

I smiled and shrugged, feeling a bit self conscious and desperately wondering if I was allowed to check any of my messages right now. Sergeant Svensson took pity on me with a smile and nod towards my omnitool, "Take a minute to let all your friends and family know you made it here safely."

Grateful for her understanding, I immediately skimmed through my missed correspondences and opened up the latest message from Klara.

[\ Klara T Palinkas [A] Joug Benning [to] Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein \]

[\ Hey! Is everything okay? I know you said you were getting on a military shuttle, but you haven't responded in a while. Is everything okay? \]

I snorted and grinned at her message. Feelings of being smitten and delighted that she cared enough to be so worried on my behalf filled me to the brim. Enough to wash away all the lowered expectations and 'new guys' of the day.

"He's smiling like a dumbass. Has to be a girl." Cerny made her mocking observation only to pause and think about it. "Or a guy. You into guys or girls, new guy? Or do you go both ways?"

What. The. Fuck. New guy? Again? I just fucking told them my name.

My happy little moment ruined, I glanced her way and gave a disgruntled reply without dignifying her prying questions with a response, "It's someone I know from back home."

"Where are you from?" Toombs curiously asked.

I took a moment to reflect on my answer and one of my original reasons for being excited when I had traveling here. I was going to be a citizen of Mindoir again. As soon as the hapticwork and application were authorized.

With a growing grin that I couldn't fight, I replied, "Mindoir. I went to live with my grandparents on Bekenstein after the raid, but I'm getting my citizenship for Mindoir again."

Once the words were out of my mouth I was amazed that I no longer held bitter association with topic. My parent's deaths would always haunt me, as would everything that happened that day, but I was beginning to move on. Mindoir was my home, and I wasn't going to let anything tarnish that. Even those horrible memories.

"Great. A bumpkin from the outer colonies." Asma grunted dismissively.

My eyes hardened into the fiercest and most intimidating scowl I could muster, having had enough of their treatment. But before I could say anything Sergeant Svensson looked askance at Asma and berated her coolly, "Got a problem with someone from an outer colony, Private?"

El Mofty lost her swagger as she cringed and looked at Svensson apologetically. Given the Sergeant's reaction I could only assume she was from an outer colony herself, and didn't appreciate any of the stereotypical insults. Good. I wasn't a fan of them myself.

Satisfied that at least that subject wasn't going to much of an issue, I began typing out a quick reply to Klara while the rest of the squad made small talk, but I was at a loss of what to say.

Well, that wasn't true. I knew what I wanted to say, but it didn't sound right. Made me come across as creepy.

I miss you.

It was an honest statement, but rather premature to be saying things like that. We'd only been talking and vid chatting for a handful of

days now. Saying something like that just felt too... personal. Too honest. I continued to stare at the blank haptic display hovering over my left wrist as inspiration eluded me.

"Alright. Enough chit chat, Blackfish Five. Let's grab O'Connell and head out to get something to eat." Sergeant Svensson broke up the discussions after several minutes.

The entire squad responded to her commands by harmonizing a disturbing series of high pitched squeaks in the back of their throats and clapping their hands together like idiots before laughing at their antics.

Stunned yet again by their behavior, I stared at Sergeant Svensson, wordlessly asking what the hell that was about.

She sighed and shook her head exasperation as they filed out of the room, "Blackfish. Orcas. They think it's funny to do that as the squad motto."

My bewilderment growing by the second, I was suddenly thrown off by a recollection of my earlier internal musings about the distinct possibility of this happening.

I'm not sure if I'm developing some sort of ability to tell the future, or, in the more likely scenario, I'm getting better at predicting the bizarre nature of life in the UNSC. The only thing I could be sure of is that if I had managed to bet someone I'd be five credits richer right now.

But in the midst of dark gods, lowered expectations, questionable smells, and a cast of strange characters, I now had inspiration on what to write to Klara. I quickly typed out my response on my omnitool and sent the message, equal parts eager and terrified of what would come next today.

[\ Luis V Shepard [A] Sarg Bekenstein [to] Klara T Palinkas [A] Joug Benning \]

[\ Got here an hour or two ago. This place is weird. These people are weirder. Not sure if this gets better or worse. Talk to you later. \]

* * *

><p>Codex Entry: M12 Warthog Force Application Vehicle, LightModular**

One of the most iconic and enduring images synonymous with humanity's military power, the M12 Warthog is an airdrop capable, all wheel drive, [4] wheeled all terrain infantry vehicle. It can trace a lineage back to the era following the Interplanetary War when the YS36 Serow Interplanetary Exploration Vehicle [IEV] created by the now defunct Yeongdo Space Corporation [YSC] in [Terran Translation: 2236 CE, Terran Standard] was the civilian and military go-to vehicle for exploration and colonization of the Sol System.

YSC was purchased by AMG Transport Dynamics in [Terran Translation: 2298 CE, Terran Standard], who quickly set about securing a UNSC contract to update the Serow model following the technological

breakthroughs of the Mars discoveries. Their final prototype, the Z12 Force Application Vehicle, went through extensive trials on Luna, Mars, and Titan before being officially adopted by the UNSC as the M12 Warthog in [Terran Translation: 2319 CE, Terran Standard].

The current iteration, the Block 15, was first fielded in [Terran Translation: 2546 CE, Terran Standard]. It boasts a reinforced frame made of carbon nanotube supporting modest composite armor plating layered under a titanium shell. The composite armor covers only the vehicle frame and gives partial protection of the occupant space with additional layers for the undercarriage and engine compartment. A roll cage protects occupants in the event of rollover, but otherwise the vehicle provides no environmental or ballistic protection. The open air seating arrangement accommodates [6] including the driver plus [1] standing weapon system operator.

Power is produced by a hydrogen internal combustion engine [HICE] paired with a solar/saline actuator and fed into an infinitely variable transmission with constant velocity joints and a kinetic energy recovery system. The rugged and powerful suspension is managed by an independent multi-link system synced with element zero cores to strategically manipulate the mass of the vehicle. As a result the M12 can provide superior traction to individual wheels when needed, configure optimal ground clearance, and absorb tremendous shock. To help facilitate rapid orbital insertion and assist in mobility enhancement the M12 also features [4] micro thrusters built into the undercarriage. These thrusters provide minimal lift, but when synced with a reduced mass field the Warthog is capable of making and withstanding impressive leaps. The wheels are made of solid carbon nanofiber skeletons to withstand the force of airdrops and provide maximum durability and traction in nearly any environment.

Under optimal conditions the M12 is capable of achieving a top end speed of [Terran Translation: 180 kph], although a reduction to under half that speed is typically used over troublesome terrain. Airdrop capabilities allow the Warthog to be 'launched' at a maximum height of [Terran Translation: 200m] provided there is roughly [Terran Translation: 100m] of open terrain capable of supporting the initial impact of landing. The solar/saline actuator is capable of converting a variety of water sources into the necessary hydrogen and oxygen fuel for the HICE. The water byproduct of the HICE is recycled into the solar/saline actuator providing a high level of fuel efficiency and increased operational range. At full capacity the M12 is capable of traveling up to [Terran Translation: 790km] under optimal operational conditions before needing refueling.

The M12 has an extensive suite of piloting, sensory and communications systems to help the driver including manual control handled by a Terrestrial Vehicle Haptic Interface [TVHI], Force Application Vehicle Mobility Virtual Intelligence [FAVMVI], Navigational Assistance Virtual Intelligence [NAVI], Battle Network Support Virtual Intelligence [BNSVI], and an Augmented Reality Heads Up Display [ARHUD], but most functions are automated to alleviate the workload for the driver. The M12 is also equipped with a Early Warning Sensory Virtual Intelligence [EWSVI] which oversees the employment of the limited on board sensory systems including simple ground penetrating radar, medium range radar, magnetic anomaly detection, and passive IR scanning. The sole defensive measure is a Class I Kinetic Barrier Generation System which is only rated to defend against standard micro mass accelerator rounds.

Due to the wide ranging nature of the M12's mission capabilities the vehicle is equipped to mount a variety of weapon systems on a pneumatic turret assembly anchored into the rear bed. Individual weapon systems which have been optimized for mounting on an M12 include: [1] Multi Missile Launcher System; [1] Anti Aircraft Laser Turret; [1] Heavy Machine Gun; [1] Light Rotary Autocannon; [1] Light Mass Accelerator Cannon; [1] Automatic Grenade Launcher; [1] Directed Thermal Energy Weapon

The M12 has been in production for over [2] [Terran] centuries, enough time for it to attain a highly respected and valued status with the public. Colonists, private security firms, law enforcement agencies, and enthusiasts are capable of purchasing decommissioned authentic military models or the commercial variants AMG sells on the open market.

Despite the well regarded image and steadfast place in the UNSC arsenal, the vehicle has always been plagued by complaints from rank and file military personnel. The most pressing is the open air seating which leaves occupants exposed with nothing but a comparatively weak kinetic barrier to protect them. The UNSC regards this as a feature and not a weakness, allowing the M12 to provide rapid ingress and egress for occupants while also maintaining a very light mass which is crucial to rapid deployment schemes.

Other issues pertain to the vehicle's handling and the HICE system. The M12 is renown in the military as having a steep learning curve. Novice drivers require extensive training in simulations under the supervision of an experienced driver. The HICE is regarded as costly and maintenance heavy in contrast to hydrogen fuel cells used in other military vehicles which provide greater power output. The UNSC reasoning for retaining the the HICE system in the M12 and other light or ultra light terrestrial vehicles is due to the ability for such a system to be refueled in the field by any water source, thus greatly reducing needed logistical support and extending the operational range.

* * *

><p>Codex Entry: UNSC Naval Fleet Depots

Across the galaxy there is a saying that no two star clusters are alike. Both breathtaking to behold and almost too large to fully contemplate, each star cluster is made of a varying compositions of stars, their accompanying celestial bodies, and an interstellar medium stretched out across dozens of [Terran] light years. Developing strategies to defend such large and wildly different territories becomes an enormous logistical task for military and law enforcement agencies of all species. The UNSC employs a variety of strategies for defense of territories claimed by the Systems Alliance but few are as vital as the naval fleet depots.

The common perception is that the heart of any star cluster lies in the mass relay, which allows for quick and fuel efficient travel between clusters separated by hundreds or thousands of [Terran] light years. While it is true that the relay network is central to modern interstellar travel and an individual relay functions as the gateway into a cluster, it is not, however, the final determination in the layout of said cluster.

Viable celestial bodies for colonization and resource extraction are the driving factor in expansion within a star cluster. Financial and technological constraints put limitations on venturing too far from a mass relay, thus making desirable locations that are distant from the relay less appealing. These concerns lead to a web of travel and communications corridors stretching between star systems that can have a significantly large effect on the perceived layout of a cluster. This layout of strategically important locations and travel routes gives a better sense of the footprint for sapient endeavors within a cluster and the actual territory requiring defense.

The UNSC solution is to place a primary military installation as close as possible to the 'true' heart of the cluster. These installations are the naval fleet depots and are intended to be optimized so as to be capable of providing a strong military response within [Terran Translation: 1 to 3 Terran Days] to any major location within the cluster.

The naval fleet depots themselves are typically created on natural satellites or small planetoids. Subterranean structures and arcologies are constructed to house military personnel and provide all the amenities of a fully functional military installation complete with training facilities, long term supply storage, and self sustaining life support. A vast array of orbital docking and refit stations provide 'anchorage' for the vessels of the naval fleet not currently on patrol and those needing resupply or repairs. Networked orbital and terrestrial defenses working in conjunction with a dedicated Strategic Installation Defense Detachment [SIDD] to provide substantial protection for a naval fleet depot in addition to whatever warships of the dedicated battle groups that may be present at any given time.

While the UNSC naval fleet depots are a central theme to the defense of human controlled clusters, they are not the only defenses within a cluster. Each major star system with a sizable population within the star cluster is defended by a dedicated Air Force Light Fleet who are the first line of defense. Additionally a major function of UNSC naval forces is to perform regular patrols along high traffic travel routes and even deeper into uninhabited sectors of a star cluster to discourage piracy or squatting. Small automated depots are also scattered across regions of the cluster to regional supply points for patrols.

Currently the UNSC only operates as many naval fleet depots as they have fleets, with each fleet assigned to a star cluster in which the Systems Alliance has major colonization. This leads to several claimed clusters along the contested Skyllian Verge without any permanent UNSC presence. That is expected to be remedied before the end of the century as Systems Alliance parliament on Arcturus station is under pressure to lobby the Citadel Council and approve funding to expand the UNSC to include fleets and divisions to permanently staff these clusters. Currently the Systems Alliance and UNSC are operating under the restrictions of the Treaty of Pax and Treaty of Farixen which prohibit humanity and Citadel Charter races, respectively, from expansions in military forces without the violating terms of agreement in the Citadel Charter. This in particular prevents the creation of new dreadnought flagships, planetary defense grids, and other military components.

17. Acclimation vs Acclimatization

****AN: My intention with this chapter was to provide more background for the world in which Shepard inhabits.****

****I'll be making a point to show the often complicated relationships between the various governments in the galaxy and their citizenry.****

****Things will not be black and white, and your perceptions as the reader are meant to be tainted by Shepard's first person perspective.****

* * *

><p>Shaddock Gymnasium, Stuhac Station, UNSC Naval Depot Czarnobog, Czarnobog, Andarta, Borvo System, Arcturus Stream Star Cluster; December 23rd, 2572 [Standardized Terran Calendar], 1802 [Synced Terran Time, Terran Standard]

Entering the open floor of the gym was a vivid realization of my worst fears. I could practically taste the blood, sweat, and tears in the air as they mingled with the brutal sounds of bodies being struck and slammed.

To call my first two weeks here eventful would be putting it delicately. Between the various refresher courses and certifications I had been lost in a whirlwind of learning new skills and proving existing ones. But now that I had managed to acclimate myself to the madness of Czarnobog and work out a schedule of my free time I was ready to follow through on my personal goals.

The first step, to pursue my education, had already begun in earnest. I was currently enrolled at the University of Illyria in not one but two majors for mechanical and electrical engineering. I wasn't fooling myself into thinking I would become an expert technician, but those two courses seemed the most prudent for finding work just about anywhere should I leave the UNSC after my eight year obligation. And in the meantime it wouldn't hurt to be learning more about how the tools of my profession worked. Or, in the most likely scenario, how to fix them given the high probability that I managed to break something.

It's not that I'm a klutz or accident prone. I'm just far too inquisitive for my own good and have the worst luck of anyone in the galaxy. It's only prudent I learn how to fix some of my inevitable mistakes.

And following that logic in being proactive, I found myself in the gym after dismissal for the day to begin the long, arduous, and evidently painful process of honing my hand to hand skills.

My face involuntarily screwed up into a sympathetic and fearful wince as I observed an unlucky soul have the wind knocked out of him by his sparring partner when she delivered a quick kick to his midsection followed by an elbow smash to the back of his head. A sweep off his feet brought a merciful end to his attempt at being a human pinata.

Wanting to challenge myself and expand my horizons was one thing, but I had the sinking feeling that I had to be insane to voluntarily subject myself to this.

A tall man of pure lean muscle had noticed my entrance and stalked forward, no doubt having correctly assumed who I was based upon the fact I was the only idiot who had signed up for this training earlier in the week. "Private Shepard?"

He wore the standard UNSC physical training outfit, but with a twist that was in line with his designation. A black shirt with a large red and orange flaming skull emblazoned across his chest, with a silver and red N7 badge sewn onto the shirt near his left shoulder.

An ODST. A Helljumper. And an N7 to boot.

It shouldn't have taken me by surprise since I knew of his credentials in advance when I signed up for this course, but it was still intimidating. Back in UCMT the knowledge that First Sergeant Yilmaz was an N7 hadn't really meant much, but that's because I didn't have the proper appreciation for what it took to earn that designation. Now I did. This man was one of humanity's finest warriors in his prime. A living killing machine. And I'm about to practice hand to hand skills with him.

My eyes involuntarily shifted to the unlucky soul from earlier. He had only barely returned to a sitting position as he gulped in huge breaths of air.

I had to be absolutely insane to voluntarily subject myself to this.

Trying to keep from being intimidated by my instructor's presence, I gathered my confidence and addressed him by his rank, "Yes, Staff Petty Officer Filipovic."

He circled around, eyeing me critically like an experienced predator. "You can drop the rank and such for the purpose of this training. I want your full participation so we're going to be very informal so that we can converse as we train. If you're confused or curious about something, don't feel shy to ask questions."

I nodded, not sure if this liberty was going to be something I regretted later on. With my luck I'd say something stupid that pissed him off enough to snap my neck.

"Light infantryman, right? Fresh from MVC 1?" He queried me as he finished his circuit.

Again I nodded, not trusting myself to say anything, and yet feeling foolish for not having much to say.

But the ODST didn't seem to mind my lack of verbal replies. He nodded in appreciation, taking a few quick backsteps and adopted a fighting posture, "Okay. Let's see what you got."

I'm pretty sure my eyes bulged out of their sockets. Was this the training? Did he seriously expect me to just attack him? I'd be killed in a matter of seconds.

Taking his advice on asking questions, I hesitated and asked, "What do you want me to do?"

Not missing a beat he grinned and beckoned me closer with teasing flicks of his wrist, "I want you to show me how you would take down a sangheili in close quarters."

This time I didn't bother with trying to hold back. "What?! I can't do that!"

Filipovic sighed and shook his head, the huge grin still present, "Relax, Private. Learn to joke around. You're too tense. Too timid. We'll never get any good training in that way."

The relief in my body was instantaneous, calming my nerves and letting me breath normally again. Of course that had to be a joke. A really bad joke, but a joke none the less. The thought of me going hand to hand with a sangheili was as comical as it was terrifying. One of those things could break me in half before I landed a punch.

Sensing my ease, he started the training with simple instructions, "Get in the basic fighting stance they taught you and throw a few punches and kicks. I want to see what I'm working with."

Well that didn't seem so bad. I shifted into the stance that DI Ellison had drilled into my memory through repetition and began shadowboxing. My limited repertoire was expended in a few seconds, but Filipovic didn't seem to care. He continued to watch me as he had before, with the critical eye of an experienced combatant.

After about twenty more second his expression turned from intense scrutiny to disgruntled as he heaved a long suffering sigh, "Stop. Just... stop. Before you hurt yourself."

I froze in my movements, feeling shocked at his response. And then embarrassed. I knew I wasn't the greatest, but was I that bad? Before I could stop myself I blurted out in timid confusion, "Did I do something wrong?"

"We'd have an easier time explaining what you did right." He rolled his eyes and ridiculed my lack of skill. "At least you're not throwing wild haymakers."

Well that was certainly a blow to the ego. "Oh."

The ODSST looked disgusted at my crestfallen response and barked, "What did I say about learning to relax, Private? You can toss that self pity out the airlock too while you're at it. You're hardly the only person to ever leave UCMT and MVC without a shred of basic skill in hand to hand. It's kind of expected, actually. UCMT and MVC doesn't teach recruits a thing except how to take a punch and flail their limbs about. It just gets tiring because I always end up having to correct the bad habits you kids have and restart your training."

My earlier shame and trepidation vanished in favor of a boiling rage. All my mind could focus on was the fact that apparently all the time spent in UCMT and MVC getting my ass kicked was for nothing. Having DI Bramante and DI Ellison yell at me was for nothing. All the

bruises, busted lips, and concussions were for nothing. "Then why don't they teach us how to do things the right way?"

"Time restraints and recruitment standards." Came his simple reply. When he saw I didn't fully follow his logic he explained more clearly. "Your drill instructors have a handful of weeks to take fifty civilian recruits fresh off the transports and cram in a metric fuckton of training to turn you into something the UNSC can work with. You don't have the distance right now from your own experiences in basic training during UCMT and MVC to appreciate what I'm saying, but give it time. We've all been there. It took me months fully get in the swing of things after I graduated. A few more weeks here on Czarnobog and maybe a deployment or two and you'll begin to see why it's a minor miracle that they got you to learn anything besides following orders."

Putting in perspective sort of made sense, but did nothing to put me at ease. Just remembering Prabhu treating me like a pinata was enough to make me surly. And that had paled in comparison to the treatment I had received at the clinic by the joyful and personable medics. "That figures. I got a concussion for nothing."

His eyebrows rose incredulously at my statement, followed by him asking for confirmation. "You got a concussion during hand to hand drills?"

"Yeah." I tried to keep the defensiveness from my response and remember that I was talking to a highly decorated soldier who outranked me, but it was rather hard to hold onto that perspective when I was this annoyed. And embarrassed.

Filipovic blinked owlishly before shaking his head in exasperation. "Well, that's a first." Realizing he wasn't exactly instilling confidence in me about my potential to learn this craft he broke from his stunned amazement and tried to put a positive spin to this informative and embarrassing introduction. "At least you recognize you need help and you've sought it out right away. That puts you ahead of the curve. Good on you for that, Private."

After having heard better pep talks from my mom and abuela I wasn't buying his bullshit, but I suppose he wasn't entirely wrong. I knew I sucked and was here to learn how to get better. I just never figured my level of incompetence reached these depths. Or that it would elicit the sort of responses I was getting.

Well, the more you know. Lowered expectations.

Feeling more calm, I nervously rubbed the back of my neck and asked, "Okay. So, now what?"

Not missing a beat, he replied succinctly, "Conditioning. For the next three weeks I want you here on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Saturdays. We're going to run you through hour long conditioning drills to develop your footwork, flexibility, reaction speeds, and balance. But if you're serious about learning proper hand to hand then it doesn't end here. You need to practice those drills by yourself on your off days. Set aside some spare time in your day to run through a full hour. More if you're feeling up to it, but no half ass efforts. You're only cheating yourself and wasting my time. Once I feel you have a better foundation we can start working on the

actual hand to hand."

"Okay. Is that anything like Drop Buddy? I downloaded that before MVC but haven't gotten around to using it yet." It was difficult to keep the disappointment from my voice, but I had been hoping there would be more to this training than what I could have figured out on my own from a sim. But then again what did I know? He was the master at this. If he said I needed to do things the way he showed me, then that's what I had to do.

Staff Petty Officer Filipovic froze, his face once more stunned in disbelief. Tilting his head to the side he queerly and cautiously asked for clarification "Did you say Drop Buddy?"

I frowned and nodded, once more unsure why he seemed to have focused on a single bit of information. Was I not supposed to be doing that sort of training yet?

My answer came when he placed his face in his palm and proceeded to attempt to relieve stress by kneading his temples. When that didn't seem to provide him with solace he dropped his hand and snorted, "I can't believe that idiot is actually making credits off being a fuck up."

Now I was really thrown for a loop. Who was he talking about? And did I do something wrong?

Filipovic shook his head in annoyance "The 'expert' behind Drop Buddy is Francis Galoustyan. A spoiled brat with a father on the board for Misriah who used family connections to weasle his way into OCS and ICT. Once he got into the Vila all of daddy's money and friends couldn't buy him a pass on an evaluation. He washed out and then got himself discharged for unprofessional behavior. Now he likes to portray himself as an ex ODS turned into billionaire playboy. You could say he doesn't exactly have the respect of the SpecWar community. You're better off having a hanar teach you how to work out properly."

Well that figures. I wasted credits on a piece of crap. Although that made me wonder just how reliable the rest of those manuals I had researched about ICT and N Series were.

He brought up his omnitool and consulted his schedule, inputting my information my information and casually replying, "Nineteen hundred after you're released for the day. On Saturdays I typically run the beginner's classes at zero nine hundred in the morning." He paused in his explanation as he saw something in my file. A quick glance towards my neck gave him confirmation. "You're a biotic, right?"

My interest piqued at his question. Finding a biotic instructor was next on my list of things to do, but Alfons hadn't been able to locate any official classes or courses available on Czarnobog. "I am. Series three implants and UNSC level one certification."

Filipovic nodded and resumed the consultation of his omnitool. "If you're interested I can get in contact with someone I know in my unit. N7 officer. She's a real badass when it comes to biotics and operates an advanced training course. Are you willing to take that on?"

"Yes! Absolutely!" My face broke into a huge smile as I couldn't contain my relief and excitement. It was another huge commitment, but to receive training from another N7 in an esoteric art like biotics was something you don't turn down. It was hard to believe but it seemed my luck might be going my way for a change. I had almost become resigned to having to contact Matron Malegos to see if she could offer some remote tutelage, although I cringed to think what she might charge for advanced education.

Then again, in retrospect it was becoming obvious how lucky I was in the area of biotics. I had been educated in the basics by a decorated and highly skilled asari commando, given initial military training from an N7 in UCMT, and now I was going to receive further individual training from an N7 who specialized in this art. There were just so many things I wanted to ask this officer about the intricacies and quirks to being a human biotic.

I couldn't wait to brag to Ari. She was going to be so jealous.

Filipovic chuckled at my delighted response and nodded appreciately, "Good attitude. That's half the battle when it comes to training. Show up here when you're scheduled ready to work and you'll be making progress in no time at all. I'll let you know if and when she can begin training with you." Then his smile became more sly and sinister. "Now I want you to start off with four laps on the track that runs around the perimeter of the room."

A quick glance around the room gave me a rough estimate of maybe one and a half kilometers. Not at all difficult.

"Did I mention you have six minutes?" My head whiplashed around at his innocent question to find that grin had become outright devious. "Get to it, Private. That's just the warm up. You're mine for the next hour and we've got to break you in."

I sighed, finding it hard to remain highly motivated as I dreaded what was coming next. Making my way to the track and breaking into a jog before I picked up the pace I reminded myself that I had asked for this.

Then I saw another unfortunate person take an elbow smash to the head that left them woozy and kneeling on the floor.

I was definitely insane to voluntarily subject myself to this.

* * *

><p>Barcelo Mining Station, Okorafor Asteroid Belt, Kippax Binary System, Arcturus Stream Star Cluster; January 22nd, 2573 [Standardized Terran Calendar], 0227 [Synced Terran Time, Terran Standard]

Behind the safety of a sealed helmet my eyes scanned the storage room and sensory readouts on my HUD carefully for anything amiss. There were no signs of threats but my nerves were on edge as I remained focused on keeping the barrel of my M55 Argus lowered at all times. No sense in frightening the already fearful and agitated colonists during this stressful visit.

Finding nothing on my HUD I turned to woman who had unlocked the room for me and gave her a thin smile in gratitude, "Thank you, ma'am."

She grunted, not meeting my eyes but making it clear she wasn't bowled over by kindness or manners. And why should she? It's not like opening up this storage room had been a choice for her.

This was my first time attached to a standard naval patrol and in less than two weeks we've conducted the seven of these sweeps on remote facilities in the star cluster. While larger and more established worlds had their own law enforcement agencies and permanently garrisoned military forces to ensure safety and security way out here in places like this the best you could find were hired security contractors. Little better than mercenaries and just as prone to acts of violence, corruption, or crime as the criminals they were hired to protect people from.

Making sure that the locals were still alive and not harboring criminals or engaging in criminal activity themselves was a necessary evil for the greater security of human controlled space. But getting people to appreciate that was understandably difficult. No one liked having the government show up to inspect the places you lived and worked. Much less when they're carrying weapons and backed up by a naval patrol group with enough firepower to vaporize the settlement.

I still recall the handful of times a year the UNSC would do the same on Mindoir. Their presence had been so commonplace that you could forget at times that they were there, but come the harvest seasons things were always heavily scrutinized because of the large flow of goods. The seemingly random inspections of farms, residences, or businesses would strain relations between the colony and the Systems Alliance.

I distinctly remember mom being regularly frustrated to tears after having to haggle over shipments of medical goods for the hospital being sequestered for further inspections. No matter how many times she obtained the necessary permits and clearances she would be forced to repeat the process of navigating the convoluted system of gaining approval from various Systems Alliance and UNSC department every year. It was a trying and draining experience that, in retrospect, probably had contributed greatly to her souring on colonial life in general and her marriage to my father in particular.

But as far as my father was concerned he took it all in stride. A comment or two on the ridiculous nature of it all and support for my mother but he mostly didn't let it bother him. Maybe it was because after having lived out in the Terminus he had an appreciation for the security that the UNSC and Systems Alliance provided.

Then again, considering Old Man Sprague and his little criminal empire made me ponder if the searches didn't go far enough. An even darker thought made me wonder if the Systems Alliance inspectors and UNSC detachments assigned to Mindoir hadn't been paid off like everyone else on the colony.

Unfortunately, blending in with population wasn't a possibility for small resource extraction operations like this out on the fringes of the star cluster. With spotty extranet service and several days

travel away from any semblance of civilization, these insular and isolated communities of generational spacers eking out a living on the frontier were more like lost tribes that shunned contact with the outside world as they plied their trade.

Generally I wasn't the type of person to be in favor of painting people with stereotypes. I abhorred the ones used to describe the outer colonies or biotics, but I was hard pressed to disagree with the well known facts that a great deal of insurrectionists and smugglers came from environments like this. Something about being this disconnected from society and the rest of humanity made you lose sight of the fact there were bigger issues to deal with in the galaxy than governmental overreach on taxes and regulations.

"_Shepard! You clear that storage room?"_

Cerny's question over the team communications network elicited a long suffering groan from me. It had been nearly two months since my arrival at the unit, and while the pranks and hazing had slowed down appreciably, it hadn't entirely ended. And since this was my first rotation out on standard patrol, the squad had sought to make the experience memorable for all the wrong reasons.

"Yes, Corporal." My reply was tinged with exasperation I was feeling. The current joke for today was to yell out my name and have me perform every task that the others didn't want to do.

As in, '_Shepard! Look in that vehicle!'_ Or, '_Shepard! Go ask the navy techs to scan this terminal!'_ And my personal favorite, '_Shepard! Ask the colonists who clearly dislike the UNSC why they're being so rude!'_

I moved to rejoin the squad as they lingered in the main hallway for this wing of the station, but Staff Sergeant Adame wasn't satisfied with my motivation levels and chastised me over our comms. "_Shepard! What did I tell you? Pep! I want to hear more pep in those replies, Private! Now move with a purpose! There is no strolling when you're on patrol!"_

Oh, and I was expected to show enthusiasm in the face of this treatment, too.

My squad were a bunch of sadistic, demented, retarded dolphins.

Rolling my eyes but careful to pour on the motivation, I broke into a swift jog but got a bit of revenge by yelling as loud as I could. "Yes, Staff Sergeant! I love this shit, Staff Sergeant!"

Not that it bothered them. Their earpieces would simply modulate my voice to an acceptable volume so as not to blow out their eardrums, but they got the hint.

Or at least Toombs did. "_I love the smell of fake enthusiasm in the... what time is it?"_

Across from him Sergeant Svensson stood loosely gripping her M5 Harrier and shrugged, having become bored with the task of poking and prodding colonists. "_Zero two hundred thirty one Terran sync. Seven hours and twenty seven minutes since we exited cryo. Locally? Who the

fuck knows?"_

"_So what else can we have him do?" _My eyes narrowed at Mullur, the resident brawler in the squad. My initial assumption that O'Connell was the squad hardcase had been a mistake. He was just a prick and classic overachiever. It was Mullur who was always itching for a fight. Which wasn't that bad since he was actually an okay guy and someone you wanted at your back on patrol. Provided, of course, if you could avoid getting caught up in him being the source of starting something. And he had been the very source of Staff Sergeant Adame's frustration the first day I arrived because of a formal hearing at battalion to discuss his role in a brawl on Sirona that had occurred two days prior to my arrival.

"_We can have him try to biotically levitate things again."_ Suvorov interjected. I had to give it to Nik. He was either fearless of what I might do to him, or dumb as fucking hell. Using the past month and a half as evidence, I was leaning towards the latter.

Nice guy. Bit weird, but dumb as fucking hell. Thankfully I'd yet to experience accidentally walking in on one of his infamous sims sessions, although I feared that it was only a matter of time.

Either way I did not want to have a repeat of the first couple of times I had my biotic training. The entire squad had joined Lieutenant Nesterovic in observing me, but unlike the platoon leader's dutiful observations their attendance involved heckling and try get me to hit random objects with mass reduction fields for their entertainment. Not only had that been frustrating and a bit embarrassing to expose the limits of my biotic control under those conditions, but I sincerely doubted the colonists here would appreciate that sort of display.

Taking on a more surly and sarcastic tone, I responded with my own suggestion, "Or how about we have him do nothing? I vote for that."

The rest of the squad chuckled appreciatively. One thing I had learned in the midst of this hazing was that while they definitely enjoyed tormenting me, they also respected my boundaries when I would voice my frustration.

"_You already do enough of that."_

Except for that asshole.

Catahecassa O'Connell lacked the good nature of the rest of the squad in teasing me. My every interaction with him so far had been tinged with thinly veiled loathing and disrespect. At first I had figured it was because of our unfortunate introduction, but eventually I caught on to the fact he was just an arrogant and unpleasant bastard. And insecure as hell to boot. Even to my untrained eyes it was obvious he was aiming to make the UNSC a lifelong career, and doing everything he could to secure promotions or advanced training.

While our long term goals were not exactly aligned, we did have plenty of overlap in our motivation to improve ourselves. Unfortunately, O'Connell saw that as competition.

Not falling for his bullshit, I calmly replied in a mocking tone, "Projecting your own insecurities again?"

Behind the depolarized faceplate of his helmet I could see his jaw tightening as his glare intensified to the point I was positive he was trying to bore a hole through me powered by vitriol alone. But before I could taunt him further Sergeant Adame interrupted, "_You're all equally worthless sacks of dog shit molded into human sized proportions that make your parents wish they had stayed home and masturbated that night instead. Argument solved. Happy? Now finish this sweep."_

The squad grumbled but complied, moving down the large hallway of the wing. Colonists lingered here and there, bored and a bit intimidated while we did our searches. Most of them kept their distance and avoided interacting with us, but there was always the rare exception. The ones who openly looked you in the eyes with a hostile glare and mumbled insults on their lips.

"_You that eager to get put back on ice, Sergeant?"_ Sergeant Svensson broke the silence to engage our squad leader in a bit of idle talk, but she had a valid point. The more time we spent down here was more time spent away from being in cryostasis. Turns out marines attached to a patrol or strike group were considered a burden on life support systems and perishable resources. Better to have us on ice and ready to thaw when needed than sitting around doing nothing but eating their food and burdening their life support systems.

Which of course added to my sunny disposition today. Nothing like hacking up a lung after being thawed to start your day of harassing colonists off right.

The Staff Sergeant shook her head and flatly replied, "_I'm eager to bug out. These people aren't exactly hiding the fact they don't want us here."_

Well that was an understatement given the continued reactions we were getting from the colonists. And yet despite their harried distrust of the Systems Alliance and the very uniform I now wore I couldn't fully grapple with my own conflicted feelings I had on the matter. My experience having grown up on a fledgling outer colony certainly made me sympathetic to their dissatisfaction with the system, but after having seen the dangers of piracy and organized crime firsthand on my homeworld I also understood the necessity of the UNSC tactics.

And yet others were not so troubled by the nuance involved.

Suvorov hefted his M5 Harrier and glanced at the colonists with sneering disdain, "_If they don't have anything to hide then they've got nothing to worry about."_

"_I doubt they appreciate that distinction when they've got UNSC Marines and Navy techs poking around through their stuff, jackass."_ El Mofty drawled scornfully in response with a slight shake of her head while her fingers drummed nervously along the length of her M739 Typhoon's barrel.

Unwilling to back down from yet another one of their now characteristic arguments, Suvorov snarled, "_So what? We're not

harassing them or doing this out of spite."_

"_To you maybe. To them it's the military entering their home for no reason other than to see if they're doing something illegal."_ Teoh interrupted the two way bickering to try to get Suvorov to see reason. "_They don't just work here, Nik. They live here. Have for generations."_

Mullur joined the conversation with a dark chuckle, "_Fuck 'em. If they can't recognize that we're not doing this to play around then they can go tongue fuck a volus cloaca. If they want to make some noise, we'll bring the thunder."_

My own groan joined the chorus of the others upon hearing his bold and frankly stupid statement. The last thing we needed right now was Mullur potentially inciting a violent reaction from these presumably innocent colonists, or turning a potentially criminal discovery into a shootout.

"_Wow. Such eloquence. I'm shocked you couldn't translate this charm and natural gift of language into being loved everywhere you go, idiot."_ Cerny's drawled mocking was just the right tone to quash his antics before they got too far.

As funny as it may be to hear the squad mock each other, she did have a point. After all, the other thing I had learned was that our squad had a reputation for being a group of misfits and malcontents with behavioral problems. A reputation that seemed more apt with every day that passed.

As if in sync with my thoughts Teoh continued the banter, "_If he was a well adjusted member of society he wouldn't be here. And those security guards on Sirona wouldn't have tried to kick his ass."_

Not missing a beat Mullur responded with an acerbic snarl, "_Fuck them too. And fuck both of you for reminding me."_

Having heard enough, Sergeant Adame halted in her tracks and turned towards Mullur, her voice carrying no small amount of annoyance as she berated him, "_Private, that mouth of yours has done shit to bring any thunder, but it has seen your sorry ass into more trouble than you can handle. Want to add to it?"_

At the NCO's strongly worded rebuke the recently demoted Private Second Grade stiffly shook his head, his gaze directed elsewhere. "_No, Staff Sergeant."_

"_Then lock it up. You are not to say another word unless spoken to or the situation dictates. We will be having further discussions about your inability to control your impulses upon returning to the Jakarta. Understood?"_

Mullur nodded once more, his posture more tense as he undoubtedly disliked the dressing down in front of the squad. The rest of the squad resumed our cursory search of the wing in silence until Toombs dryly commented, "_And to think I'll be giving up all of these good times when I leave the UNSC. I must be crazy."_

If he was referring to the questionable searches of the colonists in general or the tense moment that just past in particular I couldn't

be sure. But one thing I did know was that Toombs was a remarkable marine, even better person to have on your squad, and yet somehow the most disillusioned and cynical person I'd ever met. I'd yet to learn of the source of his internal conflict, or how that changed him during his time in service, but it was obvious his heart simply was no longer in wearing the uniform of the UNSC. He openly yearned for his contract to end and counted down the days, which was around two years worth.

In fact that had been the nature of Chief Sergeant Sokol's inquiry that first day, and just about every other subsequent day since. Trying his best to get Toombs to reconsider and reenlist. And from what I had heard, they'd offered quite a bit.

Unfortunately Staff Sergeant Adame wasn't in charitable mood, snapping back with a reply that displayed her frayed temper, _"Well until you do so, mind shutting the fuck up too, Corporal?"_

Toombs, ever the expert on creating comedy in the worst of situations and not the least bit deterred by her attitude, smiled widely and nodded as he chirpily replied, _"Only because you asked so nicely, Staff Sergeant."_

Sensing her superior was unraveling, Sergeant Svensson intervened, bringing the conversation back to the task at hand, _"We're clear here. Nothing on the scans. No hostiles or immediate threats. The navy techs can handle it now."_

The Staff Sergeant consulted her omnitool and nodded, collecting herself from her earlier outbursts, _"Yeah. Good call. I'll call it in."_ She accessed the battlenet for the ground forces planetside and informed command, _"Blackfish Actual, Blackfish Five. East wing, deck two cleared. Nothing to report. Technicians clear to begin search."_

The Lieutenant's voice replied, _"Blackfish Five, Blackfish Actual. Nice job. Return to cargo bay and await further orders."_

And with that confirmation the squad breathed a sigh of relief. Adame recalled and deactivated her drone while giving us the signal to head back. Upon reaching the door connecting this wing to the cargo bay we were greeted to several of the Navy technicians lingering about. Staff Sergeant Adame gave a respectful nod to the assembled crew who responded in kind and began their duties. We continued through the door and connecting tunnel into the cargo bay proper, feeling elated to see two other squads from the platoon sans helmets and relaxing. They had congregated near the the shuttles and dropships we had arrived in along with with the Lieutenant, Platoon Sergeant, and the ONI officer leading this mission, Commander Bergerac.

Our squad joined them, but before I could remove my helmet disaster struck. It would seem that Staff Sergeant Adame needed a new target to vent her frustrations from earlier, and I had been chosen. "Shepard! New task on deck!"

I slowly removed my helmet, looking to the assembled with pleading eyes that someone would stop this. When no salvation came I replied with more fake enthusiasm. "Yes, Staff Sergeant!"

Lieutenant Nesterovic, Chief Sergeant Sokol, and Commander Bergerac

looked on with silent curiosity as Adame scratched her scalp distractedly through the braids she wore her hair in. Lifting the hand holding her helmet to point towards a group of colonists and Navy techs discussing matters she said, "See those folks the Navy techs are talking to? I want you to ask them if you can do a scan for Virtual Intelligence Remote Universal Systems on the mining equipment."

I didn't need the snickering and rolling of eyes from the audience to confirm my suspicions this was yet another prank. "Isn't that something the techs should be handling?"

Adame narrowed her eyes at my response and increased the intimidation factor, "Did I ask for you input on this matter, Private?"

Nervously holding onto my Argus and helmet I shook my head but opted to answer honestly. "No, Staff Sergeant. It just seems like something outside the scope of our duties. That's all."

Chief Sergeant Sokol snorted loudly and folded his arms, the grin on his face showing that he was greatly enjoying this unfold. Lieutenant Nesterovic and Commander Bergerac kept their composure, but the ghost of smiles lingered on their lips and in their eyes. The rest of the platoon present, including my own squad, watched with baited breath as it was blatantly obvious I would either complete this task and make a fool of myself, or I would try Staff Sergeant Adame's patience resulting in entertaining repercussions.

And I seemed to be making progress on the latter given her growled response which hinted at danger in the near future, "Well since you're so well versed in the duties of a UNSC Marine light infantryman and have years of experience to draw from would you mind explaining to me exactly why you've come to this conclusion?"

Now common sense would have kicked in with most people at this point. Self preservation hinting that the humiliation of going through with this prank was infinitely preferable to pissing my squad leader off. But in my nineteen years of life, not once had anyone ever accused me of being a font of common sense. And this entire prank bullshit was starting to wear thin. "Uh, nothing in particular, Staff Sergeant. At least not really. This just feels like another prank."

More snorts and snickers were heard, heightening the probability that this was going to end poorly. For me at least. "Do I look like I am playing around, Private?"

Licking my lips and reflexively rubbing the back of my neck, I tried to plead my case. "No, Staff Sergeant. But in my defense you said the exact same thing when you guys had me ask around for an omniblade sharpener and holotank fluid before we left on deployment."

This time everyone didn't bother holding back, their laughter coming freely, and even the officers cracked smiles. Cerny giggled as she sought to inform the rest on more of my exploits being the source of entertainment for fifth squad. "Don't forget the battle net. You spent an hour looking for that."

El Mofty grinned and chimed in with a correction, "No that was laser turret ammo. Sergeant Cermak had him head to the XO's office to get his signature for a special requisition form with the battle

net."

At that Lieutenant Nesterovic lost all control and dissolved into hearty laughter, clearly remembering that instance because Lieutenant Hattori had been the only person to find that prank less amusing than I had.

"Yeah. Good times. Real funny. Why would I want to avoid more of that?" I grumbled to the continued howls and jeers from my platoon.

Teoh took pity on me and smiled sympathetically, "Just grin and bear it while we have our fun. You'll get to join in and haze the next person to join the squad."

"I'd rather just not do this at all." Was my curt reply.

"Well you're going to do it anyways so we can all enjoy making a fool of yourself." Suvorov gleefully reminded me.

"Where have you been, Nik? He does that on a full time basis." And once more O'Connell managed to take teasing nature of the moment and turn it into a thinly veiled insult with his sneering tone.

Already feeling frustrated from being subjected to these inane pranks I let my temper flare with a strong gaze directed his way. To his credit he didn't back down, returning the glare with just as much loathing.

Recognizing that her prank was about to start a fight, in front of an ONI officer no less, Sergeant Adame quickly interrupted our staring contest. "Enough chit chat. You have your orders, Private."

Still furious and barely holding back my anger, I transferred my glare to her and ground out my reply with a stiff nod before heading towards the colonists and Navy techs, "Yes, Staff Sergeant."

Unimpressed by my reaction, she hollered at my retreating back, "Shepard! If I have to remind you one more time about pep you're going to have another thing to worry about! Now skip with a purpose, Private!"

I paused, partly to reign in my temper, and partly to slap my M55 against the magnetic strips along the back of my armor. Then I resumed my course by skipping like a child, which drew no small amount of stunned and confused looks from everyone in the cargo bay, and more laughter from my platoon.

I came to a halt in front of a trio of naval technicians and one colonist. A perplexed Chief Petty Officer hesitantly asked, "Can I help you, Private?"

Blowing out a breath and looking over my shoulder at my platoon with a glare, I composed myself and asked, "Yes, Chief Petty Officer. I was told to come over here and ask if I can perform a scan on the mining equipment for a Virtual Intelligence, Remote Universal System."

My request stunned the small group into silence until the colonist

confusedly asked, "A what?"

Wanting nothing more than to disappear, I sighed and repeated myself in a louder voice, "Virtual Intelligence, Remote Universal System."

The colonist was floored, her eyes darting between myself and the naval technicians, until she replied suspiciously, "I don't know what the hell that is, but if it's there you guys put it there. We have standard mining, cargo, maintenance, and hazardous operations VIs on the equipment. That's it."

One of the naval technicians, a Petty Officer, narrowed her eyes and sighed, "For the love of... Private? What would that be as an acronym?"

I frowned and thought it through. Virtual Intelligence, Remote Universal System.

V I R U...

When it dawned on me I lowered my head and beat it softly against the helmet in my hands. I had just asked them if I could perform a virus scan on their mining equipment.

The Chief Petty Officer took pity on me and asked gently, "How long ago did you graduate from MVC, Private?"

"December sixth, Chief Petty Officer. Less than two months in the unit." came my morose reply.

He nodded silently and regarded my platoon with a fierce scowl. "That your platoon?" At my grunt to the affirmative he grinned deviously, "Tell you what. You tell your squad leader that you not only have my permission but my thanks for the offer of help. This will really help speed the process along if your entire platoon scans every mech and vehicle in the cargo bay. After that your commanding officer needs to file an ID10T haptic form with all relevant scanning records to verify the findings. I want that in the mission report before the patrol group leaves orbit."

I raised a skeptical eyebrow, not quite sure what exactly he was asking me to do but pretty sure I had just been conscripted into some sort of retaliatory strike in a prank war. "Will this get me into trouble?"

He shrugged and mischievously replied, "Maybe, but I can guarantee you they'll stop with the hazing."

I wasn't quite so optimistic, but what else did I have to lose at this point? "Right. Thanks, Chief Petty Officer."

"Chin up. This won't last forever. Just until they get bored or move onto a new victim." The Petty Officer offered her own words of wisdom.

I nodded appreciatively and made my way back to the platoon only to be halted by a withering glare from Staff Sergeant Adame. With an exasperated sigh I resumed my ridiculous skipping.

The rest of the platoon looked on with crestfallen expressions, no doubt disappointed that there wasn't more of a payoff for this prank.

As I approached them Suvorov whined aloud, "That's it? Nothing else?"

"Booooooring." was Mullur's response. Which garnered an annoyed glance from Staff Sergeant Adame who pointed at the deck of the cargo bay. A less than subtle reminder that Mullur was not supposed to speak for the duration of the mission.

As Mullur dropped to the ground to begin cranking out pushups Sergeant Svensson curiously asked me "What did you really tell him?"

I shrugged and answered honestly, "Exactly what I was told to say, Sergeant."

"Word for word, Private?" Staff Sergeant demanded with disbelief that her prank had resulted in no reaction.

Again I shrugged, this time adding in a nod. "Yes, Staff Sergeant. I was informed that our offer to help has been accepted and we have permission to begin scans on all vehicles and mechs, but the Chief Petty Officer insists that Lieutenant Nesterovic fill out an ID10T haptic form after we are done and attach all scanning records to verify the findings. Those findings are to be part of the mission report before the patrol group leaves orbit."

I'd be lying if I didn't admit that the stunned silence of the assembled was satisfying.

Finally Chief Sergeant Sokol roared with laughter and slapped Staff Sergeant Adame harshly on the back, "You really fucked up this time, Tazmin!"

The squad groaned in frustration and Sergeant Svensson looked to the ceiling as her shoulders sagged, "Told you involving people outside of the unit was a bad idea."

"So I recall." Adame responded glumly, glancing at Lieutenant Nesterovic with a sheepish expression.

The Lieutenant folded her arms, looking a bit flustered, and reprimanded the squad leader, but her remarks were hollow given her role in watching the prank play out. "Let's just be thankful the naval techs decided to play a prank back instead of calling your bluff. I think it might be prudent to put a freeze on this little team building exercise of yours for the time being."

Adame nodded and contritely agreed, "Affirmative, ma'am."

Commander Bergerac chuckled lightly as he consulted his datapad, clearly amused by the unexpected entertainment provided by the infantry Marines. That is until one of the colonists, a short, burly man with a full head of shaggy dark brown hair and thick beard speckled with gray, made his way over with a look of pure rage on his face.

"Is that it? Are you satisfied yet, Commander?" the man demanded loudly of the ONI officer, his chest heaving and eyes livid as he came to a stop a full meter away.

The platoon instinctively reached for their weapons and donned helmets, the jovial nature and relaxation lost as it was becoming apparent that the colonists might have reached their limit. I quickly slapped on my helmet and felt the environmental seal suck and seal in place. Instead of reaching for my M55 I quickly drew the M7 Hurricane at my hip, the weapon activating in my hands with a quick hum as I kept the barrel pointed down to avoid provoking the colonists but at the ready to begin firing.

Commander Bergerac was perfectly calm as he unflinchingly stared at the man and gestured with a hand for us to stand down. Just as much to reassure the colonists as it was a sign for us to hold back.

Taking a moment to assess the situation and examine the entire cargo bay, which had come to a standstill as both colonists and UNSC personnel waited tensely for whatever came next, the officer sighed and slowly placed his hands behind his back. With a crisp and professional tone, he addressed the man's belligerent questioning. "Not quite, Mister Murakami. Our navy technicians are still performing their scans and searches. And an additional squad of marines patrolling the exterior of your facility have yet to check in with their final assessment."

In the face of such a cool headed response the man, Mister Murakami, lost a bit of his fire. He continued to smolder in silence before asking in a more controlled and almost pleading way this time, "And what is it you think you're going to find? We're just a small operation. Generations of families going back at least two hundred years trying to make a living. We're not innies or pirates. We're not the enemy."

The ONI officer continued to regard the man with a lack of emotion, but clearly finding a weakness in his response and turning the conversation into an inquiry into his allegiances. "I don't recall anyone suspecting you of being aligned with threats to security."

"Guilty consciences are a bitch." came the unsolicited remark from Staff Sergeant Jimenez, the leader of third squad.

Lieutenant Nesterovic made a sound of annoyance in the back of her throat and glared over her shoulder at Jimenez, but the damage was done. Murakami stared at the Marine in disbelief before he bellowed, "We're sick and tired of this treatment from the Systems Alliance!"

Chief Sergeant Sokol grunted and opened up comms to the platoon, "_Here we go. The second this goes down I want you to spread out and give us angles of covering fire to protect the naval techs and transports. Second you get the west, third north, and fifth east. Fourth, maintain your position outside. We'll rendezvous with you once we evac. First, you're on me and the LT. We secure Commander Bergerac and work on getting these cargo bay doors opened."_

"_Squad leaders prepare your drones for non lethal sensory

deprivation. Do not open fire unless you're positive the colonist is armed or poses a threat to UNSC personnel." _ Lieutenant Nesterovic quickly amended the order before addressing the platoon VI, _"Alfons, inform the patrol group that we might have a potential confrontation with the locals. Corporal Terreros, get us a connection to the cargo bay door control systems but do not initiate until I give the command. I don't want to provoke this situation any more than it has been." _

"_Order processed, Lieutenant Zlata Nesterovic. Patrol Group ASC2 acknowledges report and requests SITREP. Awaiting your order." _

Corporal Terreros fiddled with her omnitool from where she was crouching near a kodiak's thrusters and replied to the Lieutenant's request, _ "Control systems hacked and connection prepared through sigmall7, ma'am. Just give the word." _

The Lieutenant nodded and opened a separate comms channel to inform the command element in the ships orbiting above while another colonist stepped forward, enraged and emboldened by Murakami's emotional outburst. I tracked him with my suit's sensors, prepared to drop him if he produced a weapon or lunged at anyone. Thankfully the man, identified as Nils Knaags by his identitag, chose to rant instead. "Doesn't the UNSC have something better for you people to do besides harassing law abiding citizens every month? Is this what what Arcturus is taxing us to death for?"

"It wouldn't be the first time I've seen an error in record keeping, but according to the briefing your 'little' operation hasn't seen an inspection by the UNSC since March of last year." Bergerac calmly parried back without looking at Knaags, his eyes still locked into a match of wills with Murakami.

Yet another colonists stepped forward, a lanky and pale woman with red hair. Within seconds my HUD had her identified as Muriel Pfluger. "Yeah? Tell that to the DCS and CAA when they're not busy breathing down our necks over whatever stupid regulations the yahoos on Arcturus have dreamed up now. Then there's MI Squared conducting their witch hunts. We can't ever find peace."

"_Somebody better contact ANN. Breaking news. People complain about Alliance regulations. Vids uploaded within the hour." _ Utley, one of the Privates from second squad, snarked over comms.

"_Shut your trap and focus, Private. This is not a game." _came the reprimand from his squad leader, Staff Sergeant Hatem.

Murakami stared down Commander Bergerac and calmly rebuked him, "Maybe you're like everyone else and don't think Spacers count, but we're still citizens. We pay our taxes. That might not mean much to you, but I have a right to complain about the government just like anyone else."

This time Bergerac frowned as he contemplated the man's words. Consulting his datapad he distractedly and curiously asked Murakami, "And how big have those tax payments been recently?"

The colonists were thrown for a loop by the man's baffling response and casual reactions. They nervously exchanged glances before

Murakami hesitantly answered, "Too big if you ask me."

Commander Bergerac hummed as if he found their reactions had said confirmed his suspicions and lowered the datapad before answering in a casually probing way. "Must be nice to make that kind of money in an honest profession. But I imagine it gives you a sense of satisfaction in a job well done."

The colonists looked bewildered and mildly insulted, but I had to give the Commander credit. His tactics seemed to be working. They were losing their violent hostility in favor of being just surly and confused. Still we maintained our protective perimeter around the vehicles as some of the naval techs began making their way towards us.

Murakami followed the movements of the naval techs with narrowed eyes and chose his words carefully, "We're not living the high life out here, but we like it. It's enough to give us the opportunity to keep doing what we love with minimal interference. You can't put a price on that kind of piece of mind."

Commander Bergerac nodded in polite agreement and then looked over his shoulder to rhetorically consult Lieutenant Nesterovic. "Lieutenant, what do you think one of those cutting edge power storage systems we observed upon approach to this facility would set you back? A couple of million credits?"

Distracted from her separate conversation with the patrol group, Lieutenant Nesterovic hesitated before activating her voice module to respond, "Easily, sir."

I had to admit I shared her confusion. What did that have to do with anything? And if the expressions of the colonists and even some of the Navy techs were anything to go by, none of them seemed to understand what he was getting at either.

"Kind of makes you wonder how a small little family run operation can afford something like that, doesn't it? Or why they would even need it in the first place?" The ONI officer turned back to face Murakami as he posed the loaded question in a mockingly curious way. "I'd be willing to bet that ONI and MI2 would be curious to know just how you came about purchasing something like that as well. I don't imagine it would be difficult for them to request sales records from Menon Energy to track the pertinent details either. I doubt they'd forget selling something like that."

Scanning the large docking bay for threats I was able to notice the colonists had a peculiar reaction to the officer's accusations. Some of them were offended and agitated at the treatment, but a curious few looked nervous. Guilty even. Murakami's reaction might have been the most telling though. He seemed to be rocked back on his heels and stunned for a moment before gathering his wits to glower at Bergerac with a new level of loathing, "Last time I checked the Systems Alliance hadn't gone full totalitarian. What we spend our credits on is none of your business, jackass."

At his barely restrained response a few of the colonists were becoming visibly aggressive. Off to the left a colonist attempted to slyly pick up what appeared to be a plasma cutter from a nearby workbench only to have second squad train their weapons on him before

he got a full grip on the handle.

"Okay. Let's keep things civil here, gentlemen." Chief Sergeant Sokol engaged his own voice module and gestured for the colonist to step away from the tool in an attempt to prevent the situation from escalating.

Commander Bergerac nodded appreciatively at the Platoon Sergeant's intervention, but Pfluger was not as grateful. "You want to talk about civility when your thugs are trying to insinuate we're guilty of something and then point weapons at us? Go fuck yourselves!"

My heart began thundering in my chest as the palms of my hands felt uncomfortably itchy and sweaty beneath the layers of my suit. This situation was rapidly spiraling out of control and for the life of me I couldn't understand what the ONI officer was trying to accomplish here. At first I thought he had been attempting to diffuse the situation by engaging in details to bog down the conversation and get the colonists using their minds and not their emotions, but now it seemed he was deliberately escalating things. It's almost like he wanted one of the colonists to make the first move so we had the excuse to open fire.

Unfortunately some of the colonists looked ready to oblige him.

In the tense silence that followed Pfluger's outburst I chanced a glance towards Chief Sokol and Lieutenant Nesterovic in the hopes that they were prepared to step in and prevent a massacre. Those hopes were dashed as I noticed they both were just as stunned by the situation and unsure of how to proceed.

I resumed my duties with more than a little bit of despondency as I came to the realization that my first deployment with a patrol group was going to have me be part of something that sets off a new Insurrectionist War.

Wonderful. Here's hoping they spell my name right in the news reports and history vids when they talk about how I helped kill civilians.

Oddly enough the person with a solid grip on sanity was Murakami, who broke off the discussion with as polite an ultimatum as he could manage given the situation. "I think your inspection is done. If you're not going to declare or seize something then I'm going to ask that you leave."

Commander Bergerac gave the man a silent stare before shrugging and sighing, having washed his hands of the matter. "It that's what you truly want then we can accommodate that, sir. I can't make any promises that you'll enjoy what consequences this incident might bring in the future."

"We'll take our chances." Murakami brazenly replied, but for once the majority of the colonists looked unsure about the course of action being taken. I wasn't too sure either as I could only assume that Commander Bergerac was hinting at Systems Alliance law enforcement agencies and possibly even the UNSC returning in force to seize the facility and shut down operations. Chances were probably high that a couple of these colonists might take offense to that. Violently.

I hoped that I was wrong and that it would never come to that, but feelings of guilt and fear had me dreading extranet headlines to come in the next few months. Maybe my unit had managed to avoid butchering these colonists, but these people might have only postponed the inevitable.

The Commander motioned the flight crews to fire up their vehicles, which was our cue to board them. He then placed his helmet on and turned to leave before theatrically turning back around to beg one final question. "Before we leave I do have to ask you what the purpose of a power storage system like that is to you? My superiors are going to want answers on that and I'm going to have to be honest in my assessment that it clearly outstrips your current power generation and consumption needs. You can understand why that would appear suspicious, yes?"

Murakami didn't answer, but he didn't need to. His nervous mannerisms and overly aggressive stance were speaking volumes as he eyed the last navy techs streaming past him towards our shuttles and dropships.

"Nothing nefarious." Knaags replied, this time to prevent any of his fellow colonists from making this situation worse. Not many of them appreciated it. More than a few scowls and glowers were directed his way.

"Then what?" Commnander Bergerac seized upon the communication as the thrusters on the kodiaks and pelicans fired up. "If you don't mind answering? It would go a long way towards alleviating our concerns."

The man didn't respond, and at Lieutenant Nestrovic's silent command our squad moved to take up defensive positions flanking the Commander while the rest of the platoon disengaged to load up into the transports. I moved a bit more to the right and knelt down near the nose of a Kodiak. Examining the cargo bay and it's occupants from my new vantage point I was struck at how many more of the colonists had arrived to see the final exchange between their leadership and the UNSC. And then I was astonished to see children and the elderly in the crowds.

Feeling compelled to speak up and maybe prevent a catastrophe I activated my comms, "We got kids present. To the left near the third wing entrance."

The battle net was silent for a beat before Sergeant Adame's muttered, "_Shit. He's right."_

"_Sir, we are to disengage immediately per Admiral Paes orders."_
_Lieutenant Nesterovic almost pleaded over the comms.

"_Thank you for informing me, Lieutenant. You've done your job. I'll take full responsibility and inform the Admiral why I failed to obey her orders to the letter."_ The man was unflappable and remained locked in on his goal. He engaged his voice module and once more queried the unresponsive occupants of the cargo bay. "Anyone? Or should I leave it up to my imagination to speculate on the nature of your actions here in my report?"

Reasserting himself as the leader and spokesman for the colonists,

Murakami brusquely replied, "I've told you this several times now. We're a generational operation of families. There have been multiple additions and expansions since the first prefabricated buildings were put up nearly two centuries ago. Things get a little cramped here every generation or so. We've decided to be proactive and plan now for future expansion. Is that so hard to understand?"

Great. He answered and we could leave now.

The ONI officer nodded appreciatively as he gazed around the cargo bay, "That's got to be some serious expansion you've got planned." Returning his gaze to Murakami he finally hammered home his suspicions. "I'm more concerned it might be used to power some unauthorized weapons systems. There's also the possibility you might be trying organize an unlicensed industrial fabrication facility."

Or not. I suppressed a groan of annoyance at the Commander's continued prodding and provoking.

Some of the more bold members of the colony looked indignant and near meltdowns as they vented their rage with roars of disgust. Behind them I saw some of the more sane adults begin trying to escort others out of the cargo bay. I wasn't sure if that was a sign of responsibility, or an admission they were about to attack. Either way I gripped my Hurricane a bit more tightly, the wound up nerves in my body sending slight tremors along the tense muscles in my neck and back.

Silently I begged the Commander to end this and board his shuttle.

Pfluger erupted, taking several steps towards the Commander and screaming in rage before she was halted when El Mofty and Toombs locked their weapons on her. "For fuck's sake! All we do is mining! That's all we're doing! You fucking degenerates!"

"This is the problem with you UNSC thugs. You think everything is about shooting or blowing things up. It's all you're trained to do. Simple minded people who think the rest of the galaxy is just like them. You're no better than innies or pirates." Murakami voiced his disgust for us with wild gesticulating.

Having had enough of the verbal abuse and threats of hostility, Commander Bergerac stalked forward until he was well within Murakami's personal space before any of us could react. All activity ceased as everyone held their collective breath, fearing this was going to be the spark that ignited this volatile situation. His voice was cold and authoritative, raising the volume of his voice module to be heard clearly by every colonist in the cargo bay. "Or maybe when the actual shooting and bombing starts it's people like you that are the first to ask why it wasn't prevented? Why we didn't do more?" Leaning into Murakami the Commander practically growled, "Well this is what we do to keep everyone safe."

Fearful and cowering in such close proximity to the imposing UNSC officer, Murakami took an instinctive step back and offered a feeble response. "Still doesn't mean we have to like it."

Nodding in agreement the Commander motioned for us all to board his

shuttle, which we eagerly complied with. I quickly strapped myself in and watched as he strode confidently towards the door only to pause near the door. Looking over his shoulder to stare at Murakami one last time, he resumed his calm demeanor from before, "And neither do we. We're humans, just like you. We come from the inner colonies, outer colonies, and little remote stations like this. Just like you. And what we dislike dealing with more than anything is the aftermath of shootings and bombings because it means we failed at our job to keep you safe." He let his words sink in with the colonists before nodding to them slightly and shutting the kodiak's door. "Thank you for your hospitality, sir. I hope your expansion plans go accordingly. For both our sakes."

The Commander took his seat and strapped in as the Kodiak jolted as it lifted off. The thrum of the active mass effect fields hummed through my body but all I could do was suck in deep breaths as the stress and adrenaline of the last few minutes evaporated. In it's place was a hollow feeling of weakness that left me with slight tremors and a still racing pulse. I glared at the Commander behind my polarized faceplate, annoyed with his serene and placid expression as the Kodiak continued it's ascent. Hate flooded my every fiber as I wanted nothing more than to throttle his neck over what he had done. What he had nearly made me do.

Breaking away my murderous gaze I opted to stare at my armored hands, balled into tight fists atop my legs that wanted to punch something or someone but lacked an outlet.

I nearly killed colonists. Innocent people. Children. What the hell was I doing? What had I become a part of? What was I becoming?

Somewhere in the back of my mind I had a recollection about my initial observations about being assigned to this unit. How one day I too might have become acclimatized to the organized chaos and madness of a dark god just like everyone else.

So much for lowered expectations.

* * *

><p>Codex Entry: M55HR Heavy Rail Argus Battle Rifle

The M55HR Heavy Rail Argus Battle Rifle is Misriah Armory's foray into the recent emergence of a niche group of anti personnel weapon systems known colloquially as 'shield breakers'. Shield breakers first saw development by Armax Arsenal as the H29 Incisor for Turian Hierarchy military forces in [Terran Translation: 2496 CE, Terran Calendar] as a response to analysis and assessments following the [Terran Translation: First Contact War]. Originally conceived as a subset of long range marksman rifles designed for rapidly degrading kinetic barriers, the weapons saw limited demand and use due to skeptical appraisals by experts across the galaxy. This perception changed when the H29 was fielded by C-Sec Emergency Containment Units to great success during the infamous [Terran Translation: 2512 CE, Terran Calendar] hostage situation by Rakhana Independence Coalition [RIC] terrorists on the Citadel's Tayseri Ward.

The shield breakers are a deviation away from the accepted practice

of precision marksman weapons using larger shavings at higher velocities to punch through shields and armor. Instead these weapons focus on a highly synchronized burst of smaller sized shavings fired at more manageable velocities in a tight pattern. By placing overwhelming pressure on select locations shield breakers are able to defeat and potentially damage kinetic barrier generation systems. This radically different approach of quantity over velocity and mass allows shield breaker style rifles to be wielded tactically by forces engaging in hostage rescue, counter terrorism, target acquisition, and high value target capture activities.

Intrigued by the possibility of such weapons, the UNSC research teams worked with Misriah Armory to create their own prototype, the XBR55, which fired a [3] shaving burst. The weapon was tested and fielded by UNSC Air Force security details and SpecWar counter terrorism units starting in [Terran Translation: 2548 CE, Terran Calendar] during the height of the Second Insurrection War to mixed reviews. While the weapon performed proficiently in it's intended role, it fared poorly in all other combat roles. Relegated to a role as a niche weapon for highly specific circumstances, the XBR55 entered regular service in the UNSC arsenal with all branches as the M55 Argus Battle Rifle to little fanfare. This perception changed when resourceful UNSC soldiers present on Harvest during the initial Covenant invasion of [Terran Translation: 2565 CE, Terran Calendar] refitted M55 battle rifles with customized heavy rails and repurposed Enhanced Visual Optics Suites [EVOS] from M392 Saber Designated Marksman Rifles. The end result was a vastly improved combat weapon system and the precursor to the M55HR upgrade package for existing Argus battle rifles.

All current models feature a black polymer coating with dark gray ceramic accents for ruggedness, insulation, and grip. The M55HR upgrade introduces an integral electronics suite attached to the dorsal surface that is derivative of the EVOS system and known as the Enhanced Visual Optics Suite Burst Recoil [EVOS-BR]. Like the standard EVOS system found in the M392, the EVOS-BR activates when engaging targets at range and aids the user by making slight corrections in the internal mass effect fields holding the shavings for accuracy and tighter groupings. Additionally, the EVOS-BR adds a recoil control function which prevents the burst from becoming scattered. Weapon and target status can be smart linked and displayed via the HUD in armor and headgear suites. An unobtrusive tactical holographic can be displayed just above the electronics suite showing simple readouts. The weapon does not produce holographic pop up sights but instead has an optional modular optical scope known as the Enhanced Visual Optics Suite Display [EVOS-D] which can be attached to the dorsal surface. An additional integral targeting module housed within the dorsal electronics suite produces a sighting laser that can be linked to networked weapon systems for laser designator guidance. As the entire firing mechanism is linked to EVOS-BR suite it greatly restricts the type of internal modular enhancements available. The weapon does possess a ventral rail for modular attachments such as a M301 munitions launcher or M788 omni-weapon field fabrication suite.

While the Heavy Rail upgrade allows for the M55 to fire standard sized shavings at high velocity, the increased power of the weapon has produced several drawbacks. Foremost in concern is the weapon is limited to [12] firings of the [3] shaving bursts before overheat. With the EVOS-BR limiting modular enhancement to address the issue of

overheating, this prevents the weapon from seeing use as a standard replacement for the M5 Harrier Assault Rifle or M392 Saber Designated Marksman Rifle. Secondly, the original XBR55 was calibrated to fire smaller shavings not only to be highly accurate but to better conserve the ammunition block. Firing [3] shavings per burst with the Heavy Rail mod can deplete the block in a deceptively quick manner, resulting in [247] total firings before the ammo block is exhausted.

* * *

><p>Codex Entry: UNSC Defense Force Light
PatrolReconnaissance Brigades**

An area of major focus in modern military strategy is the ability to deploy forces in diverse locations across dozens of light years to engage in a variety of missions at any time. This need for a dynamic and efficient military force was emphasized for humans after their encounter with turians during the [Terran Translation: First Contact War]. In response the UNSC overhauled many aspects of their structural, strategic, and tactical policies to better reflect their new found understanding of the galaxy.

A major revision was the reorganization of the UNSC Army and Marines divisions into specialized regiments structured around specific warfighting capabilities and made of subunit brigades designed to function independently in their designated role or as part of the greater military force in large campaigns. This change coincided with the UNSC Air Force and Navy reorganization to better use their assets and logistics to transport these revamped ground forces to battlefields and areas of strategic importance across the galaxy.

One such type of unit created was the Light Patrol/Reconnaissance Brigades [LPRB], a self sufficient ground force built to be easily transported by minimal naval or air force assets and orbitally inserted quickly so as to perform scout and advance assault services. The LPRB is the standard unit assigned to the UNSC Navy Expeditionary/Patrol Strike Groups and UNSC Air Force Interplanetary Response Groups in a role as terrestrial security and reconnaissance.

Each LPRB consists of: [1] Headquarters Command and Combat Logistic Services Company; [2] Light Infantry Reconnaissance Battalions; [1] Light Infantry Strike Battalion; and [1] Mechanized Infantry Scout Battalion. With the exception of the mechanized battallion, these units are characterized by a minimal amount of support vehicles which allows them to emphasize unmounted combat. Rather than be seen as a limitation this lack of mounted firepower is an appeal to rapid deployment to combat piracy, suppress insurrection, and act as initial planetary assault forces.

That is not to say that the LPRB are a perfect solution to every situation. They show a significant weakness when engaging in long duration engagements against mechanized or armored units due to their heavy reliance upon air support from the Air Force and Navy groups which delivered them. A lack of heavy mounted armaments makes them susceptible to enemy atmospheric and orbital power as well.

Recent studies have also shown that field use of the LPRB units to

assist in searches and seizures on remote or minor colonies may have played a role in exacerbating the Second Insurrection War. While this research is now widely accepted in Arcturus and Sydney, the UNSC and Systems Alliance have chosen not to address this concern. The general consensus among the UNSC leadership and members of Arcturus Parliament is that the use of LPRB units gives a projection of power that successfully deters piracy, insurrection, and organized crime from the fringes of Systems Alliance space as well as provides necessary ground security for naval and air force technicians.

End
file.